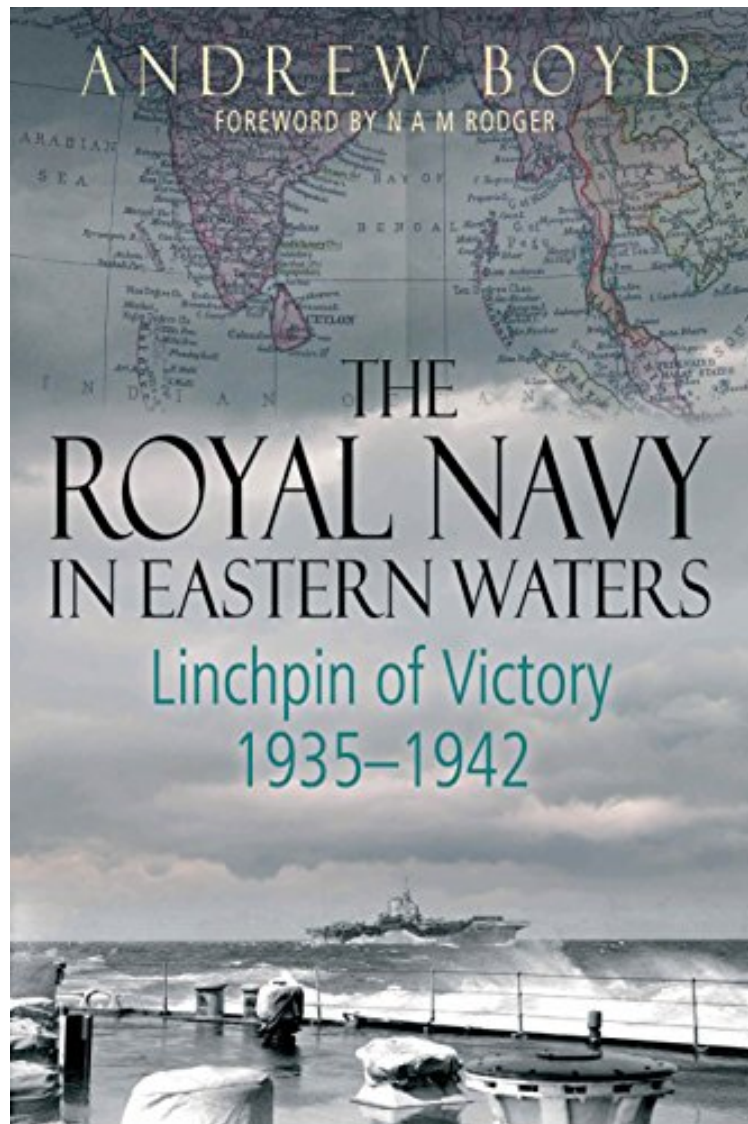


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The Royal Navy in Eastern Waters: Linchpin of Victory 1935-1942

Andrew Boyd

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Andrew Boyd : The Royal Navy in Eastern Waters: Linchpin of Victory 1935-1942 before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Royal Navy in Eastern Waters: Linchpin of Victory 1935-1942:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. How the Royal Navy succeeded in defending its Eastern EmpireBy NishantThis is honestly one of the best books I have ever read, and I am glad that it is the 50th book I finished this year! Much has been written about the naval wars in the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Pacific theaters of World War 2.

Less has been written about the war in the Indian Ocean, and Andrew Boys fills this gap with a description of a British grand strategy that defended the Indian Ocean and the Eastern Empire, stretching from East Africa and Egypt, through the Middle East and India, to the Malay Barrier and Australasia. In the process, he debunks many myths and misconceptions about the abilities of the Royal Navy and the British in general in defending this vast region of the globe. The book covers the period from 1935, when the United Kingdom started seeing a real threat from all three Axis powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan) to the end of 1942, when all threats to the core of the Eastern Empire had vanished. The following paragraph from the book gives a good introductory summary: "The importance of the war potential of this wider eastern empire and the role of the Royal Navy in securing it is the central theme of this book. With American help, the Royal Navy had to find a way of countering the existential threats to this empire war potential from both east and west. In meeting these threats, the campaigns it fought in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean were both essential and interdependent, and they indirectly influenced the Atlantic outcome too. In a global war for survival, securing the overall war potential of this eastern empire space and denying it to the Axis powers ultimately mattered more than holding any specific territory, even Singapore. This is the measure against which Royal Navy performance in the East should be judged." Chapter 1 covers the evolution of the Royal Navy from 1935-1939, as it sought a strategy to fight a war against three enemies. Despite misconceptions of a naval power in decline in the interwar years, it was still the largest navy in the world, and backed by the largest shipbuilding industry. The Royal Navy produced about as many ships in each category as the combined Axis powers (except submarines), and it was an innovator in the areas of anti-submarine warfare and carrier warfare (especially in radar, reconnaissance, night strikes, and the armored carrier). In 1939, the Royal Navy's objective of an offensive war in Europe and a defensive war in the East was an achievable objective, especially with the help of the French navy against the Italians. In fact, the Royal Navy was able to survive and achieve its objectives even with the Fall of France and the loss of the French Navy, a remarkable achievement. Chapter 2 covers the evolution of Royal Navy strategy for fighting its three enemies simultaneously. As the threat from Germany and Italy grew, the Royal Navy modified its commitment to send a fleet to the Far East immediately after a Japanese attack to a pledge to do so if absolutely necessary, while considering the needs in the Mediterranean and Middle East. This of course made the Dominions, especially Australia, suspicious, but it was a more flexible strategy allowed by possession of the Suez Canal, allowing the Royal Navy to shuttle forces between the Eastern Mediterranean and the Far East as necessary. Chapter 3 covers the change in British strategy after the disastrous Fall of France and the entry of Italy into the war. During this period, the British decided to maintain a forward defense in both boundaries of their eastern empire: Egypt and Singapore. The major commitment to the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, which many have denigrated as a sideshow, was done in order to protect the Middle East Oil and the Persian Corridor route to Russia, and to keep the important neutrals Turkey, Spain, and Vichy France out of the Axis camp, which would have disastrous repercussions on the Middle East and the Battle of the Atlantic. The British, in holding Egypt, succeeded in their forward defense of the western boundary, but this was done at the cost of reinforcements to the eastern boundary. The British did not have enough resources to defend Egypt and Singapore, especially since the increase of Japanese air power with their occupation of French Indochina forced the British to hold Malaya and Sumatra if Singapore was not to be made untenable by Japanese air attack. This, combined with the Admiralty's fixation on holding Singapore as an end in itself, instead of as a means to protect the Eastern Empire, meant that the defense of the Far East would suffer serious setbacks. Chapter 4 covers British talks with the Americans over a common naval strategy in the Atlantic and the Pacific. Due to the "Germany First" strategy, and the American perception that the British were seriously threatened by the Battle of the Atlantic, an "Atlantic Substitution" strategy was agreed upon. This would entail American warships relieving Atlantic escorts, allowing the relieved British warships to head to the Far East to deal with the Japanese. Unfortunately, this left insufficient American ships in the Pacific to mount a credible deterrent against the Japanese, especially after Pearl Harbor. The British overestimated the US Navy's ability to cover two oceans, and this overconfidence would play a role in the Admiralty maintaining an offensive strategy without the forces to back it up in December 1941. Chapter 5 covers the British intelligence on the Japanese forces in the Far East in mid-1941, as well as the Royal Navy's capacity to counter them. In fact, the British had a pretty accurate estimate of Japanese forces, with the main flaw being in its underestimation of Japanese air power. As for the Royal Navy's available forces, it did have a shortage of fleet destroyers, as well as battleships and carrier tied up in repair, though on the other hand, the German and Italian navies lost 40% of their surface fleets so far and British merchant shipping was higher than at the start of the war. Thus, though Force H at Gibraltar was the only force available immediately, but it could soon be joined by the capital ships under repair. One major weakness was the Fleet Air Arm's numbers and quality in the East, though the quality difference between them and Japanese planes has been overstated. Furthermore, despite narratives of weak British multi-carrier doctrine, the Royal Navy was a major innovator in air defense, and Force H was the first consolidated fast carrier task force. The Pedestal convoy operation involved 4 British aircraft carriers which had to defend against submarines, surface forces, and over 600 aircraft. Though the convoy and the escorts took major losses, most of this was from U-boats and E-boats, while the German and Italian air units did not cause as much damage. This amazing defense against an overwhelming air attack would probably have not been achievable by the US or Japanese navies. The British had

sufficient intelligence and capabilities to help defend against the Japanese. Chapter 6 covers the Royal Navy's reinforcement of the Far East and its attempt at deterring Japan towards the end of 1942. During this period, the Admiralty shifted from a prior strategy of holding interior lines in the Indian Ocean to a forward offensive strategy of basing a major fleet at Singapore, with an advanced base in Manila to harass Japan's line of communications in the South China Sea. This was done because it thought that, combined with the American Asiatic Fleet in the Philippines and the Dutch Fleet in the East Indies, the Allies had the resources to make this offensive strategy possible. This seems ludicrous in hindsight, but the Allied did not know exactly when Japan would attack until right before Pearl Harbor. If the attack was delayed until March 1942, the Americans would have sent large reinforcements to the Philippines, which could have combined with British reinforcements to Force Z to deter or counter a Japanese attack better than was done in December 1941. Chapter 7 covers the causes and consequences of the dispatch and destruction of Force Z, the Prince of Wales and Repulse in December 1941. It was the Admiralty, not Churchill, that decided to send Force Z all the way to Singapore, instead of keeping it in Ceylon, where it would still act as a deterrent without being in danger. In December 1941, the Admiralty's strategy of a forward defense of the Malay Barrier was impossible, as shown by events. Despite this failure, the sinking of Force Z was not as catastrophic as the common narrative suggests. Even if it had survived, it could not have saved Singapore or the Dutch East Indies. At best, it would have enhanced the capability of Somerville's Eastern Fleet, not an insignificant improvement, but in the end, the Eastern Fleet achieved its objective anyway. After the loss of Force Z, the Admiralty made a distinction between dispensable interests, namely Southeast Asia and the East Indies, and areas critical to the war effort, namely Australasia and the Indian Ocean. While the forward defense of the eastern boundary failed, the Royal Navy's defense of the core of its Eastern Empire ultimately succeeded. Chapter 8 covers the importance of the Indian Ocean to the Allied war effort and the role played by the Royal Navy in protecting it. In 1942, the Eastern Empire was under threat from three directions: from the Germans and Italians in Egypt, from the Germans in the Caucasus, and from the Japanese in Burma and the Eastern Indian Ocean. Loss of the Abadan oil fields could have led to a reduction of 20-25% in the British war effort. Furthermore, though the Persian Corridor route accounted for about a quarter of Lend-Lease to Russia throughout the war, it was 40-50% in 1942 with pauses in the Arctic convoys. Without this route, the Soviet economy and war effort could have collapsed, or at least suffered much more greatly. The Eastern Fleet was supposed to be a fleet in being to defend the Indian Ocean. Given this goal, Somerville acted recklessly during the Indian Ocean Raid by closing with Nagumo's 5 carrier force, and by detaching 2 cruisers and the small carrier Hermes, which were easily sunk. Despite his recklessness, he had the chance to sink 2 carriers in a night carrier attack (where the British were masters and the Japanese were inexperienced) when they separated from the rest of Nagumo's force during the battle. Even in our timeline, British carrier planes were able to attack the Japanese carriers without being detected beforehand, though they all missed. One or more lucky hits could have sunk a carrier: at Midway, a single bomb hit was enough to cripple the carrier Akagi and force her scuttling. In any case, despite the serious losses, the Eastern Fleet was still mostly intact, and would be reinforced by further units later in 1942, including modern battleships and a 3rd fleet carrier. These would have made a Japanese invasion of Ceylon very difficult. After Midway, the Japanese threat to the Indian Ocean evaporated, so parts of this fleet were sent to Madagascar and Mediterranean operations. Thus, the Eastern Fleet achieved its strategic objective. The following couple of paragraphs explain the effectiveness of the Eastern Fleet in 1942: "The Royal Navy was overstretched in 1942, but it faced an inescapable commitment in the eastern theatre for the first half of that year. If the Axis had secured control of the Indian Ocean, denying Britain the resources of India and Australasia, and cutting the supply lines to the Middle East and Russia, while giving Germany potential control of Persian oil, the Allied task would have been immeasurably harder. Indeed, clear victory might have been impossible. The Royal Navy had to counter this risk. It had just enough latent strength in modern ships, modern technology, fighting effectiveness, and global support and experience, to do this, provided it had enough time to redeploy the necessary forces." "The weakness of Royal Navy forces off Ceylon in April 1942 reflected temporary limitations and was not representative of what the Royal Navy could do if required. Its ability, successively through 1942 to deploy a significant Eastern Fleet; plan major reinforcements for that fleet; project a substantial expeditionary force 7000 miles from the United Kingdom to seize Madagascar in May; mount the complex Pedestal operation at the other end of Africa, using some of the same forces, just two months later; and finally to mobilise 160 warships, including seven carriers, for Torch, demonstrates that the picture of Royal Navy power being in decline is overdone. The Royal Navy remained a strong and resilient force with global reach. Somerville undoubtedly hazarded his fleet at Ceylon, but came close to inflicting serious damage on the IJN." Before I conclude my review, I'd like to note a fascinating Annex with tables showing warship construction by the major naval powers (UK, US, Japan, Germany, and Italy) from 1930-1942. These tables show that British warship production matched or exceeded the combined production of the 3 Axis powers in every category except battleships (with a match if the two 1927 battleships Nelson and Rodney are included), fleet carriers (5 British vs 6 Japanese), and submarines (countered by vastly more production of destroyers, destroyer escorts, and anti-sub vessels), though 5 of the 6 light and escort carriers that match Japan's 6 were Lend-Leased from the US. Furthermore, the Royal Navy produced more ships than the US Navy in all categories except battleships (5 vs 6) and destroyers (exactly equal), and light and escort carriers, even producing 5 fleet carriers to 3 American carriers.

Perhaps Britannia no longer ruled the waves, but it matched production of its combined enemies and of its eventually dominant ally, and its construction program, especially its ASW ships, was a much better investment than that made by the Germans, who produced U-boats too slowly, and the Japanese, who failed as ASW, which was fatal for a maritime empire. These final paragraphs provide a good conclusive summary of the book: "Above all, the contribution of the British Empire and that of the Royal Navy in safeguarding the Middle East and the Indian Ocean from the Axis between spring 1941 and winter 1942 has been understated. It has been overshadowed by later American strength, once it was properly mobilised from 1943 onward, and the dominant contribution of the Russian army to breaking German land power. Yet British control of the area from Egypt in the west, through the Indian Ocean to Ceylon, and thence to Australasia, was critical in containing Germany's military potential during this period. Britain needed the resources and strategic leverage of this eastern empire to ensure her own survival as an effective fighting power, to wear down Germany and Italy by denying them oil and expending their air power, to and later to ensure the survival of her vital Russian ally through the Persian supply route. This empire contribution made while Russia's fate was still in the balance, and before American potential could take effect, was fundamental to future Allied victory. It was the empire's last great gift to Britain. It was delivered by many without much choice, but still in the hope of a better world after the war." "The Royal Navy held prime responsibility for securing the war potential of this space from the existential threats facing it at both ends. The initial British defeats to Japan at sea were not in themselves a sign of imperial failure, nor did they mean that Britain must abandon sea areas previously considered vital. They were temporary, albeit avoidable, setbacks eclipsed by long term strategic success in securing what mattered most in the East. After the protection of the Atlantic lifeline, this was the Royal Navy's greatest achievement in the war." "The only issue I have with the book is that I would have liked to have seen a discussion of the Royal Navy's efforts in the East from 1943-1945. Fortunately, there are excellent books on these later years, including David Hobbs' "The British Pacific Fleet: The Royal Navy's Most Powerful Strike Force." 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Highly recommended By grey14 As a long time student of history, particularly military history, this is one of the finest studies I have ever read. I won't try to do a chapter by chapter synopsis as the previous reviewer has done, but this study is really more than a "revisionist" look at the Royal Navy, focusing "just" at its strategy, plans, and operations in the Far East and Indian Ocean. Instead, it really is an in-depth relook at all of the documentary and secondary material on the RN, focused in the geographic area in question, but also fully tied into the larger RN situation, as well as British (and American) grand strategy as a whole. Where the author may "exonerate" the RN in one area, he is fully prepared to be scathing in his criticism of other areas, particularly the Admiralty's "forward" strategy in late 1941. The amount of research is absolutely astonishing--and the endnotes themselves quite interesting. Moreover, for those looking to understand how a great power juggles forces and resources between multiple fronts, attempts to match objectives to available resources, and coordinates its plans and deployments with a major ally, it provides an outstanding example. I won't belabor the point--if you have any interest in the RN in WW 2 or thinking about strategy and relating that to available forces, you need to read it. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Excellent book, as long as you keep an open mind and leave any preconceived ideas at the door (where they belong!) By Mr Moose (Jnr.) An excellent book as long as any preconceived ideas on the subject matter are left at the door where they belong. Name is a tad misleading in my opinion but nevertheless a trivial matter in a thought provoking book which no doubt to many people - who carry their preconceived notions with them - will be a controversial book. Action lovers (and I certainly am one, but.....) look elsewhere though, as save for last chapter on Op C it's more about the goings on that one rarely gets to read about. And that's what makes it so good / unique! After finishing the book if one is not left with a sense of astonishment as to the Herculean effort the Brits had on their hands shuffling ships and men around to meet all their needs in all theaters in the first two years of the war then you are very hard to please. The authors research reference notes alone take up 85 pages, and is the only bug bear with reading the book, that is you find yourself constantly turning to the back of the book to see where he got his 'data' from. But better that than being left wondering where that 'new' -- or little known / contrary to some established notions -- info came from. 5 stars, even without the action I generally prefer.

The Royal Navy in Eastern Waters tells the compelling story of how the Royal Navy secured the strategic space from Egypt in the west to Australasia in the East through the first half of World War II. It explains why this contribution, made while the Soviet Union's fate remained in the balance and before American economic power took effect, was so critical. Without it the war would certainly have lasted longer and decisive victory might have proved impossible. After the protection of the Atlantic lifeline, this was surely the Royal Navy's finest achievement. The book covers grand strategy, intelligence, accounts of specific operations, and technical assessment of ships and weapons. It challenges established perceptions of Royal Navy capability and will change the way we think about Britain's role and contribution in the first half of the war. The Royal Navy of 1939 was stronger than is usually suggested and British intelligence did not fail against Japan. Nor was the Royal Navy outmatched by Japan, coming very close to a British 'Midway' off Ceylon in 1942. And it was the Admiralty, demonstrating a reckless disregard for risks that caused the loss of Force Z in 1941. The Royal Navy in Eastern Waters also emphasizes the key role the American relationship

played in Britain's Eastern naval strategy.

About the Author Andrew Boyd, CMG, OBE, DPhil, was educated at Britannia Royal Naval College and St. John's College, Oxford. He served as a submariner in the Royal Navy before joining the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1980. He has had a long-standing interest in twentieth century naval history and was awarded a research fellowship to undertake a DPhil.