

HOME WATERS: ROYAL NAVY, ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY AND U.S. NAVY MINE FORCES BATTLING U-BOATS IN WORLD WAR I

“Gentlemen don’t lay mines.” This chivalric approach to warfare does not, however, translate to the sea lanes of real maritime battle, as comprehensively set out in this encyclopedia of historical collation and description.

In *Home Waters*, David Bruhn and Rob Hoole have aggregated many previously disparate sources that detail the dangerous and painstaking work of the small ships, trawlers, fishing smacks and other assorted watercraft built or requisitioned by the UK Government to deal with mines and U-Boats surrounding the British Isles during World War I. Interweaving many new accounts and memoirs that are appearing on the internet to supplement more traditional primary and secondary sources, this work is a highly readable history as well as a superb future reference.

The sub-title slightly belies the focus of the content, which carefully guides readers through the *Home Waters* mine and counter-mine activities of on one side, the British, Canadian and US navies, and German forces on the other. The general fight against German U-boats is a recurring theme, but the prose eloquently sets the minewarfare battle into the holistic context of a busy surface-ship war (complete with American spelling of dreadnaught [sic]).

The multitude of carefully crafted threads throughout this book centre on the painfully slow realisation by the Admiralty that mines, both offensive and defensive, can either be of considerable utility to your maritime campaign (if they are your own), or can be of great hindrance (if they are your enemy’s). The parlous state of British minewarfare forces at the start of the war (the Royal Navy had only 10 minesweepers in commission, augmented by the Auxiliary Minesweeping Service, Trawler Section) necessitated a significant generation of capability whilst the sword of Damocles was hanging over our country.

Illustrating many of the steps taken to develop and then field new mining and counter-mine techniques, as well as the crews to implement them, each description is underpinned by the political imperative or military context. This book contains many salutary lessons regarding under-preparedness of peacetime naval forces. That the British Minesweeping Service ended the war with 726 vessels (an active-force increase of 7260 percent over four years) should not be lost to history, and even this high total was further augmented by the US and the embryonic Royal Canadian Navies.

As both offensive and defensive weapons, the (quoted) 235,983 naval mines laid in all parts of the world in World War I were factors in many of the battles, tactics and major decisions taken by both sides. Bruhn and Hoole’s descriptions of these are engaging and sobering. This goldmine of information, anecdotes and tales of valour, about ships that are often neglected in the Mahanian grand-battle histories of World War I, is sure to take its place in the personal libraries of every naval analyst.

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