



Tin Can Titans: The Heroic Men and Ships of World War II's Most Decorated Navy Destroyer Squadron by John Wukovits.

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Rarely have the exploits of an entire group of destroyers or “tin cans” been recounted in a single narrative. Naval historian John Wukovits' attempts to do just that in *Tin Can Titans*, focusing on the US Navy's Twenty-First Destroyer Squadron (hereafter, Desron 21). In that sense, this volume is a conventional narrative history of an unconventional subject. From late 1942 to Japan's surrender in August 1945, Desron 21 compiled an extraordinary yet often overlooked record of accomplishments in the Pacific War. Wukovits's thesis is that the unheralded work specifically of destroyers, rather than aircraft carriers or submarines, ensured the Allied victory over Japan.

[Destroyers] did not always participate in those headline-snaring surface engagements in which battleships and cruisers slugged it out with the Japanese, nor did they glide across the waters in grand style as did the fast carriers in their air squadrons. Theirs was more often the grunt work—the bombardments, the escorting assignments, and the harbor screenings. (237)

Using many primary sources as well as interviews with surviving destroyer crewmen, the author strips away the idealized image of serving aboard destroyers during the most intense naval war in history.

During both World Wars, destroyers often carried out their vital responsibilities anonymously: protecting more valuable, war-winning capital ships, hunting submarines, laying mines, or acting as jacks of all trades. The author's choice of subject is well advised. Although not officially listed as Destroyer Squadron 21 until 10 March 1943, its core members, USS *Fletcher*, *O'Bannon*, and *Nicholas* had arrived at Guadalcanal by September 1942, to be joined later by *Taylor*, *Radford*, *Jenkins*, *La Valette*, *Strong*, *Hopewell*, *Howorth*, *Chevalier*, and *De Haven*. By the time of Japan's surrender, the twelve *Fletcher*-class ships of Desron 21 had earned 118 battle stars and three Presidential Unit Citations for their actions in the Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, New Guinea, Philippines, and Okinawa campaigns. Although nearly all the squadron's ships sustained battle damage, only three were lost to enemy action—the *De Haven*, *Strong*, and *Chevalier*, all in the treacherous waters of Guadalcanal and “the Slot.”

Wukovits centers his narrative on a single ship and its captain: the USS *O'Bannon* (DD-450) and Cdr. Donald McDonald. Despite its numerous engagements, including close-quarters fighting in the First Naval Battle of Guadalcanal (12–13 Nov. 1942), the *O'Bannon* sustained only minor damage throughout the war and lost none of its crew members. McDonald, USNA Class of 1931, deserves much of the credit for this. A popular and engaging commander, he was highly skilled in

1. His previous work includes *Devotion to Duty: A Biography of Admiral Clifton A.F. Sprague* (Annapolis: Naval Inst. Pr, 1995), *Pacific Alamo: The Battle for Wake Island* (NY: NAL, 2003), *Eisenhower: A Biography* (NY: St. Martin's, 2006), *One Square Mile of Hell: The Battle for Tarawa* (NY: NAL Caliber, 2006), and *Hell from the Heavens: The Epic Story of the USS Laffey and World War II's Greatest Kamikaze Attack* (Boston: Da Capo, 2015).

ship handling and battle maneuvers; he eventually earned two Navy Crosses and three Silver Stars during his tour aboard the *O'Bannon*.

Wukovits organizes his work chronologically into three parts: the origins of the squadron and its “trial by fire” around Guadalcanal, the ferocious battle for the Solomon Islands, and the advance through New Guinea, the Philippines, and Okinawa. It was in the Slot, that legendary body of water northwest of Guadalcanal, that Desron 21 earned its reputation. Here Wukovits is at his best as a naval historian. His visceral portrayal of the daily lives of destroyer sailors in the Slot provides a glimpse into their brutal struggle with a determined enemy in an atmosphere of oppressive tropical heat that tested the limits of human endurance. The near-constant combat and rapid pace of operations in spring and summer 1943 exhausted even some of the destroyers’ more veteran crewmen.

On the *O'Bannon*, Commander McDonald had to deal with untested junior sailors as well as old hands unable to withstand the daily strain of patrolling in the Slot. One chief petty officer swallowed mercurochrome as a way to be transferred off the ship. The self-assurance and ingenuity he showed in meeting such personnel challenges made the *O'Bannon's* commanding officer a “stabilizer” for his fellow squadron skippers (126).

Wukovits well captures the response of men enduring the grueling conditions of combat in the Slot:

Day after day the crews lived and worked with their shipmates, inevitably creating a special bond with them, but over the course of the next few months, in so freely intermingling with the crews of the other squadron ships, they also developed a sense of pride in their unit. (117)

For most sailors in the US Navy, their place within a squadron or division was merely an administrative reality. Their true loyalty lay with their own vessel. By contrast, Wukovits compellingly argues, the men of Desron 21 “enjoyed the recognition they received from being part of ... a fighting unit that gained a reputation for being a superb squadron. That squadron pride, forged in 1943, lasted through the war’s final days, which saw them leading Halsey’s fleet into Tokyo Bay” (117).

A few other naval historians have recently highlighted the importance of destroyers.² But they do not concentrate, as Wukovits does, on the day-to-day lives and stresses of destroyer crews over the course of an entire war. That said, *Tin Can Titans* is not without flaws. For one thing, it is entirely American-centered, with little attention given to the Japanese side. And there are only superficial mentions of the deadly oxygen-powered Long Lance (Type 93) torpedo. Indeed, Wukovits seems uninterested in the technology of naval combat in general. Granted, he makes it clear that his is a history about men, not machines. But attention to structural and other details of the marvelous *Fletcher*-class ships, called perhaps the best overall destroyer design of the war, would have lent added realism to his account of their crew members’ experiences.

These quibbles aside, John Wukovits has crafted a remarkable example of popular naval history solidly based on relevant source materials. Besides consulting ships’ war diaries and after-action reports in the National Archives, he also interviewed ten veterans from Desron 21 and makes extensive use of oral histories. In short, *Tin Can Titans* belongs on the bookshelf of every general or specialist reader interested in the Pacific War.

2. E.g., James Hornfischer’s *Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors: The Extraordinary World War II Story of the U.S. Navy’s Finest Hour* (NY: Bantam, 2004) and *Neptune’s Inferno: The U.S. Navy at Guadalcanal* (id., 2011) offer superb insights into American destroyer operations in the Pacific.