

# H-Net Reviews

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**Michael Gillen.** *Merchant Marine Survivors of World War II: Oral Histories of Cargo Carrying under Fire.* Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015. 216 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-9467-5.

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Studies of the naval dimension of the Second World War invariably examine tactical and strategic dimensions of the conflict, perhaps the Battle of the Atlantic or the fleet engagements of the Pacific War. For the former, victors and vanquished are uniformed, military personnel; only occasionally is the civilian dimension of torpedoed merchant and passenger vessels included. Rarely are the members of the United States Merchant Marine, the nation's fourth arm of defense, properly lauded for sustaining the war effort beyond a passing nod to their heavy sacrifices.[1] Michael Gillen, a former merchant seaman and professor of Asian history at New York's Pace University, has produced in *Merchant Marine Survivors of World War II* a work of personal passion, an invaluable compilation of oral histories from members of the Merchant Marine.

The genesis of Gillen's work began over thirty years prior to publication. While he was involved in the project to preserve the Liberty ship SS *John W. Brown*, Gillen began interviewing Merchant Marine veterans from the war. The book shares the stories of twenty of those veterans, interviewed from 1978 to 1987, and all having passed prior to publication. Originally focused on those merchant seamen who had survived loss of one or more ships, Gillen's focus changed, he explains, as he recognized that all who served, whether torpedoed or not, contributed vitally and paid with some of their own in multiple ways, we've come to understand, that could, from the trauma of it, endure for years (p. 4).

In the twenty accounts, essentially vignettes of wartime service, the central emphasis is service and sur-

vival. For every individual, Gillen prepares a concise introductory biography for his reader about the veteran's career prior to his oral account. The unvarnished, carefully transcribed accounts, reminiscent of Studs Terkel's *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (1984), are fluid and vivid, the occasional salty language interspersed with social, political, and cultural opinions of the veterans.[2]

Scholars or interested researchers of World War II will find three oral accounts from survivors of the infamous convoy PQ-17. Other accounts include surviving torpedo attacks in the Caribbean and the North and South Atlantic, and the fighting in the Philippines and South Pacific. The survivors' descriptions of life in wartime Archangel and Murmansk, Russia, or capture and imprisonment by German auxiliary cruisers are fascinating. Frequent descriptions of the aftermath of a torpedo attack and ensuing sinking and evacuation of a merchant vessel are vivid and moving, memories both painful and yet seemingly distant to the survivors.

Gillen deserves particular praise for the quality of the interviews. His merchant sailor experience combined with talent as a listener and interviewer produced high-quality oral accounts where the hallmarks of age, decades removed from the recalled events, are not evident. The author's hand is largely invisible, aside from the occasional notation or transcribed motion by the interviewee. Via Gillen's deft editorial touch, the selected accounts achieve the author's intent to showcase the service and sacrifice of the World War II survivors of the Merchant Marine.

In maintaining his focus on the veterans' accounts, Gillen is careful not to add any superfluous elements. Each chapter has efficient and crisp endnotes to clarify details in the text, with detail about the vessels, enemy aggressor, the lost, or other noteworthy details. At the conclusion of each account, Gillen includes a postscript for postwar service. Readers are provided with two appendices, one a glossary of relevant nautical terms and another of a typical Liberty ship crew composition. A small bibliography is included of published primary and secondary sources, albeit with the most contemporary work published in 1995. An inclusion of suggested readings would be more effective for this work, considering the paucity of historical monographs—much less academic syntheses—of the US Merchant Marine. Enthusiastic readers will want to know more after finishing this work.

And therein lies the true value to Gillen's work. In the enormity of the Second World War, every element of American society experienced the conflict in some capac-

ity. Three uniformed civilian organizations, the US Merchant Marine, Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), and Civil Air Patrol, all served the nation's armed forces and incurred casualties. While the WASPs received the status as veterans in 1977, a court order only belatedly granted the World War II Merchant Marine members this status in 1988. *Merchant Marine Survivors of World War II* is an invaluable work, giving scholars a solid source from which to draw for perspective, anecdotal evidence, and greater awareness of the dimensions of war and the unsung men who provided an invaluable element of the nation's maritime strength.

#### Note

[1]. A notable postwar exception, cited by Gillen, is Samuel Eliot Morison's *The Battle of the Atlantic, September 1939–May 1943*, vol. 1 of *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1947).

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