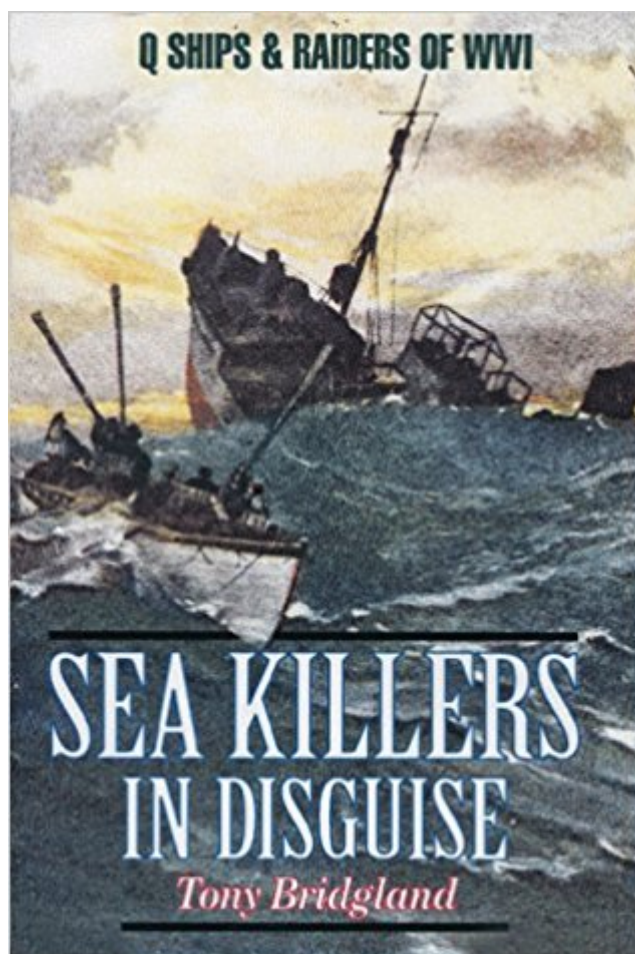


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Sea Killers In Disguise: Q Ships & Decoy Raiders Of WWI



Synopsis

Disguised as harmless merchant ships, Q-ships could be transformed in moments into powerful warships and the lengths taken to insure their secrecy make an intriguing story.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Winston Churchill, father of so many of the deceptions and ruses of 20th Century warfare, invented the idea of Q-ships in 1914. As First Lord of the British Admiralty, Churchill signaled the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, Admiral Sir Hedworth Meux, on 26 November 1914: "It is desired to trap the German submarine which sinks vessels by gunfire ... A small or moderate sized steamer should be taken up and fitted very secretly with two twelve-pounder guns in such a way that they can be concealed with deck cargo or in some way in which they will not be suspected. She should ... have an intelligence officer and a few seamen and two picked gunlayers who should all be disguised. If the submarine stops her she should endeavor to sink her by gunfire. The greatest secrecy is necessary to prevent spies becoming acquainted with the arrangements." Bridgland's "Sea Killers in Disguise" tells how, from 1915-1917, about 200 British ships were converted to Q-ships. The Q-ships were large enough to be appealing U-boat targets, but not quite so large as to warrant a scarce German torpedo. U-boats mostly attacked on the surface, after challenging their targets to stop. The Q-ships were "a strategic lure, a tactical bait, and a deadly hook," to catch the German "U-fish," whose secret weapon was deception. Q-ship camouflage screens concealed weapons that included depth charges, torpedoes, and 4-inch guns. When stopped by a U-boat, the

well-drilled Q-ship crew would conduct the "panic tactic"-pretending to abandon ship, while hidden gun crews dropped the screens hiding the Q-ship's armaments. The approaching U-boat would be blown out of the water. At least that was the theory. Q-ships fought over seventy duels with U-boats, and sunk eleven to fourteen (about eight percent of the 145 U-boats sunk during the Great War), with about 25 to 30 Q-ships sunk by the U-boats (about fifteen percent of the Q-ship fleet; historians differ on the various numbers). Q-ship effectiveness in the Great War, numerically modest, had greater psychological impacts. Q-ships damaged some of the U-boats they failed to sink. The Q-ship deceptions deterred all U-boat skippers; the most helpless steamer could turn out to be a "trap ship," as the Germans called them; probably more than one innocent merchantman was spared by the overly-suspicious U-boat commanders. Memories of the Q-ships even inspired caution in the next generation of U-boat skippers during World War Two. The sheer numbers of the Q-ship engagements provided the German U-boatmen useful counter-deception indicators. U-boat survivors of Q-ship duels, and letters from captured U-boat crewmen soon compromised the basic Q-ship secrets. U-boat captains approached even the most innocent steamers ready to sink them. The "panic tactic" lost its novelty. In January 1917 German naval strategy changed to unrestricted submarine warfare and the U-boats attacked submerged. The Q-ship deception had run its course. No longer obliged to surface and challenge a target, U-boats attacked without warning, rendering Q-ship deceptions useless. Convoying (the best anti-submarine tactic) made individual decoys, like the Q-ships, pointless. Bridgland's "Sea Killers in Disguise" provides a superb reference to these decoy and deception trap ships in the Great War, offering lessons for today's naval commanders confronting camouflaged arms and drug runners, terrorist suicide ship bombs, and other modern asymmetric naval threats based on denial and deception.

FIRST OFF: READ THE PREVIOUS REVIEWER FOR AN OVERVIEW OF THE TOPICS

COVERED The previous reviewer stated the subject and tone of 'Sea Killers in Disguise : Q Ships & Decoy Raiders of WWI', by Tony Bridgland, exceptionally well. Since I concur with his statements wholeheartedly I will limit this review to an examination of the merits of the book. IN A NUTSHELL:

JUST HOW TRICKY AND DECEPTIVE IS STILL 'OK' WAR CONDUCT? World War 1 was a bigger and nastier war than anyone had ever known or expected. As a result, some particularly nasty tactics were employed, mostly out of desperation, by both sides. This text examines the human side of one of those nasty tactics --- 'The Q Ships' & 'Decoy Raiders'. The allies employed 'Q Ships', mostly tramp steamers with some 3-4" guns and a crew of ringers, to neutralize the U-boat threat while the Germans used a similar brand of subterfuge to add havoc to the allied shipping losses on

the high seas. This wonderful reader tells some of the tales of the men and ships that participated in this grand ruse, on both sides. It focuses on the methods of deception and diversion which varied from sailors dressing-up like women, to men-of-war flying neutral colors until they fired onto a unsuspecting enemy at point blank range. This book contains stories of the men and ships, such as Germany's Luckner, who captained the 'Seeadler' with distinction, not the least of which was substituting ingenuity for brutality, very much to his credit, as well as England's Cmdr. Godfrey Herbert who captained the 'Baralong' into international infamy for the alleged mass murder of a German U-boat crew. **BOTTOM LINE: EXCELLENT READ INCLUDES PERTINENT ILLUSTRATIONS & MAPS** This book tells the story of this rather sordid brand of naval conflict surprisingly well. I put off reading this book, feeling that this subject lacked the grandeur and glory of the Battleships and naval battles that normally interest me. I was wrong to do so as this book was not only interesting, but quite revealing regarding human nature and the honor and ingenuity of the human beings forced into very stressful situations. **ALSO RECOMMENDED: The Kaiser's Pirates: German Surface Raiders in World War One (Hardcover) by John Walter**

I can't say enough how much I enjoyed this book. Well-written, and one of the most well-researched volumes I've come across, particularly in an area where there's a distinct dearth of information. Does what you hope for any non-fiction historical work; tells a great story (well, several stories) that fires the imagination and is true to boot. I wouldn't hesitate to recommend it, loan out my copy often and it's worth every penny.

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