Whirlwind: The Air War against Japan, 1942–1945

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Barrett Tillman

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of area bombing and the decision to pursue the unconditional surrender of Germany; and Fritz Allhoff’s “Physicians at War: Lessons for Archaeologists?” looks at ethical dilemmas of medical professionals with respect to military ethics, medical ethics, and torture in an endeavor to provide insight and parallels for other professions.

Whether one is interested in archeology and cultural preservation in a war zone, the archeology of military and battle sites, the erection of military monuments, or considerations for military planners and those who subsequently execute their plans in combat zones, there is much to consider in this book. The final chapter consists of a series of responses from archeologists to queries concerning relations between them and the military during the war in Iraq. Some of the respondents have had experiences both in Iraq and with the military, and some have not. However, the respondents all have connections with the preservation of cultural heritage, and their comments show that professionals outside the military must also evaluate the ethics of their own disciplines with respect to war. For example, should a member of a community outside the military, such as an archeologist, provide information and advice before a conflict commences, or only later? Though these are not questions for the military professional, military professionals should be aware of them. Stone is to be commended for bringing together in a single volume essays and perspectives on this important issue. Interested readers will not be disappointed.

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Over sixty years after its conclusion, the air war that was waged against Japan remains one of the most controversial and brutal campaigns conducted by any of the Allied powers during World War II. The debate centers on the questions of the morality and necessity of the bombing campaign against Japan, primarily its cities, that culminated in the dropping of two atomic bombs, and whether the campaign hastened the end of the war.

In his richly detailed and well written *Whirlwind*, Barrett Tillman addresses these two arguments and the decision making that led the United States to wage aerial war. He starts by laying the groundwork with the surprise bombing of Tokyo by U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) B-25s led by Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle in April 1942, relating how Japan’s leaders, shocked at the audacity of the carrier-borne attack on the home islands, moved forward with a complex plan to eliminate the U.S. Pacific Fleet once and for all, thus setting the stage for Japan’s strategic loss at the battle of Midway less than two months later.

However, the USAAF and its chief, General Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, had bigger plans of their own for Japan. Arnold, a disciple and friend of General Billy Mitchell, resolutely believed in the power of strategic bombing to bring about an enemy’s surrender. The Royal Air Force and USAAF had thoroughly tested this theory in the skies over
Germany, with mixed results. Despite a relentless and costly air campaign, the German Wehrmacht could only be defeated on the ground. A basic concept of strategic-bombing theory held that heavy civilian casualties would force enemy leaders to sue for peace, but the theorists and practitioners did not factor in the callous nature of despotic leaders who cared little for the welfare of their citizenry. (For more information on this subject see Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan, by A. C. Grayling.)

Japan was a different story. Arnold envisioned unleashing the as-yet-unfielded B-29 Superfortresses on Japan en masse. The USAAF first tried conducting operations from China, but that proved untenable for a variety of reasons. Eventually airfields on Guam, Saipan, and Tinian, islands that were taken at great cost, came into existence for sustained B-29 operations.

The air war against Japan was much more than the story of B-29 raids on Tokyo and other targets. One little-known operation went under the dark moniker of Operation STARVATION, the deployment of aerial mines by B-29s. These sorties proved quite effective in whittling down Japan’s merchant marine, thus devastating Japan’s morale and eroding its capability for war production. USAAF crews delivered twelve thousand mines, sinking 293 ships between March and April 1945. Yet for all the successes that the United States had in the skies over Japan, the USAAF and U.S. Navy cooperated little in the planning and implementation of the overall campaign. Each service pursued its own air operations, the Army going after Japan’s cities and the Navy after Japan’s fleet and coastal shipping.

Tillman’s excellent book is well researched and well written. He reintroduces the reader to the pivotal leaders who played a role in the execution of the air war on Japan. He rounds out his narrative with accounts from B-29 aircrews and naval aviators who flew at the tip of the spear aimed at Japan; their observations and recollections add an excellent sense of humanity to the story. His account also serves to validate joint operations, a lesson borne out by the experience of this war and one that our military continues to observe today.

This book will not end the debate on the value and moral justification of the U.S. air war on Japan. Tillman clearly makes the point that while the air war against Japan did not end the conflict on its own, it did affect Japan’s ability to continue to wage war. In the end it is clear that Japan was willing to fight despite the destruction of its cities and that it was preparing mightily for the expected invasion of the home islands. However, it was the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that finally forced Japan to seek peace and end the slaughter.

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This is an exceptional book. Although it has its share of strategy, logistics, and technology, it is primarily a book about relationships and leadership.