

2012

Battle of Surigao Strait

Richard Norton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Norton, Richard (2012) "Battle of Surigao Strait," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 65 : No. 1 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol65/iss1/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Sikorsky, Frank Piasecki, and Arthur Young. The narrative offers a tip of the hat to the Marine Corps, acknowledging that institution's decision to champion this emerging technology, as well as the parts played by the Navy and Coast Guard, but the strength of this book resides in its examination of the helicopter's influence on combat over land.

The Vietnam War serves as the lens through which the rapid development of helicopter-borne operations is studied. Anecdotes about operational leaders whose vision married capabilities provided by industry with the arduous conditions of the Southeast Asian battlefield provide evidence of how modern warfare was changed. Anecdotal evidence is supported by statistics detailing the number of troops and the amount of material transported within the theater, as well as the grim losses suffered in accomplishing these missions. Within the Vietnam context, the tactical and operational impacts of rotary-wing aircraft are clearly demonstrated. The argument revolves around the postwar failure to maintain the wartime momentum.

The discussion of the post-Vietnam developments asks difficult and uncomfortable questions. Delving into the fiscal disparity between the research and development efforts supporting fixed-wing, tactical aircraft and similar efforts for the benefit of rotary-wing aviation, the author reaches conclusions that may be disconcerting for advocates of traditional airpower. This critique of overspending on fixed-wing research and development at the expense of survivability, lethality, and capability for rotary-wing aircraft gives the book a controversial edge.

Walter Boyne has delivered a timely study that asks difficult, important questions about the future of military aviation, especially in an era when the nature of combat operations is rapidly evolving. For these questions alone, it is a worthwhile read. The lucid analysis of the technological issues and the compelling stories of the pioneers and warriors who brought the helicopter to prominence are icing on the cake.

K. J. DELAMER
Naval War College



Tully, Anthony P. *Battle of Surigao Strait*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2009. 329pp. \$18.45

The sprawling battle of Leyte Gulf was fought from 23 to 26 October 1944, and nearly seventy years later it still has the power both to fire the imagination and to provide enduring military lessons. As drama goes, the battle (or more precisely, a series of engagements, each deserving a name of its own) is an apparently bottomless cornucopia of personalities, desperate gambles, and heroism, as well as of enough "what-ifs" to spawn a cottage industry of alternate histories. In at least one way, Leyte Gulf has similarities to Gettysburg. Both battles have been written about so extensively that some authors focus on the smaller engagements that together complete the picture of the larger conflict.

The basic story of Leyte is a familiar one. Faced with growing U.S. naval power, a steadily weakening fleet, and initial American landings in the Philippines, Japanese naval authorities initiated a bold stroke. Using their precious remaining carriers as bait, they drew off Admiral William F. Halsey's Third Fleet

while they attempted to reach the U.S. beachhead with powerful surface forces approaching through the San Bernardino and Surigao Straits. The majority of power would be contained in Admiral Takeo Kurita's Central Force, which would force the San Bernardino Strait and approach the U.S. transports from the east. Two smaller but still potentially deadly forces, commanded by Admirals Shoji Nishimura and Kiyohide Shima, would attempt the Surigao Strait and attack the Americans from the south. Kurita's force came closer to victory, but, due in part to a gallant defense by inferior U.S. forces, and with the counsel of his own forces, Kurita turned back on the doorstep of success. In contrast, Nishimura never had a chance. Admiral Jesse B. Oldendorf turned the Surigao Strait into a killing sack. As Nishimura drove deeper into the strait, his forces were treated to wave after wave of attacks that ended in a crescendo of firepower, as Oldendorf's main battle line put an end to the Japanese southern attack.

Rather than write only about the big picture, Tully puts Surigao Strait under a microscope. Drawing extensively from little (or never) -accessed Japanese records, he painstakingly pulls together his account of the battle. Each Japanese ship is discussed in detail, each commanding officer is subjected to scrutiny, and communications are reviewed. The result is impressive: what emerges is a convincing and incredibly detailed account of this segment of the battle.

In re-creating the battle, Tully takes on several "mysteries" that have endured since 1944. The first is the fate of the Japanese battleship *Fuso*. It is known that the ship was destroyed, but the exact circumstances of its sinking have

been a matter of conjecture. The next mystery is the sinking of the Japanese destroyer *Michishiro*. In this instance there is uncertainty regarding the claim that USS *Hutchins* (DD 476) sank it. Finally, Tully seeks to discover the exact manner in which the Japanese destroyer *Yamashiro* was sunk. By Tully's own admission, these issues are military minutiae, but they are important to him. He obviously wants to know where U.S. torpedoes struck the doomed *Yamashiro* and what happened to *Fuso*.

Tully's writing style, for the most part, is pleasant, analytical, and temperate, although from time to time the neutral tone of the distant observer shifts to a more impassioned vernacular, particularly when Tully is arguing a position or describing some especially dramatic moment. However, the result is not problematic. It is Tully's personal passion for the subject that elevates this book above many naval histories, along with his eagerness to present the Japanese point of view. This is a perspective that with few exceptions is lacking in Western accounts.

RICHARD NORTON
Naval War College



Busch, John Laurence. *Steam Coffin: Captain Moses Rogers and the Steamship Savannah Break the Barrier*. New Canaan, Conn.: Hodos Historia, 2010. 726pp. \$35

One of the great events in American, and indeed world, maritime history occurred in the summer of 1819, when the American steamship *Savannah*, commanded by Captain Moses Rogers, became the first steam-powered vessel to cross the Atlantic Ocean. Its pioneer