

2006

Review Essay

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Recommended Citation

Parshall, Jonathan B.; Tully, Anthony P.; and Wildenberg, Thomas (2006) "Review Essay," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 59 : No. 3 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol59/iss3/11>

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REVIEW ESSAY

HOW THE JAPANESE LOST THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

Thomas Wildenberg

Parshall, Jonathan B., and Anthony P. Tully. *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway*. Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2005. 613pp. \$35.00
Kernan, Alvin B. *The Unknown Battle of Midway: The Destruction of the American Torpedo Squadrons*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2005. 181pp. \$26.00

Midway was one of the most decisive naval battles of all time. It was a battle that should have been won by the Japanese but wasn't. Future American writers would dub it an incredible or miraculous victory, based on the superiority of the Japanese and the widely held perception before the battle that the Imperial Japanese Navy was invincible. During the six months of war preceding Midway the Japanese carrier fleet rampaged unchecked throughout the Pacific, destroying the U.S. battle line at Pearl Harbor and enabling Japan to seize the Philippines, capture Singapore, and overrun the Dutch East Indies. Since the opening attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese had conducted a series of spectacular campaigns and smashing victories that seriously weakened American and Allied naval power in the Pacific. The Japanese navy successfully attacked and damaged a significant portion of the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor, obliterated British seapower in the Pacific, and won an overwhelming victory over the hodgepodge of Allied forces that had been caught in the Java Sea. To most observers it seemed as if the Japanese navy was indestructible. Then came Midway—a battle in which a supposedly weaker American force won a spectacular victory that blunted the Japanese advance in the Pacific. It was the turning point in the

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Naval War College Review, Summer 2006, Vol. 59, No. 3

war against the Japanese empire—the point at which the U. S. Navy took over the strategic initiative, and after which it never looked back.

The battle of Midway was a tragic defeat for Japan and its navy. The Japanese had placed their faith in quality over quantity and had trained and prepared to defeat a numerically superior enemy. Yet, as Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumiya explained in *Midway: The Battle That Doomed Japan* (Naval Institute Press, 1955), “a stronger Japanese force went down to defeat before a weaker enemy.” How and why this happened is explained in *Shattered Sword*, the first new English-language book on the Japanese side of the story since Fuchida and Okumiya’s *Midway* was published fifty years ago.

Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully have produced what will undoubtedly become the definitive work on the Japanese navy at Midway. Although neither is a Japanese linguist, they have acquired an amazing amount of information on Japanese carrier doctrine, the planning that went into the Midway operation, and the specific details of the air operations during the battle. Their narrative is carrier-centric, told in terms of what would have been directly visible or otherwise knowable from the bridges of the Japanese carriers. This is a highly effective technique, one that produces a clearly defined picture of the carrier operations and aerial doctrine employed by the Japanese at Midway.

The book is organized into three sections: “Preliminaries,” in which the origins and “political machinations” that led to the Japanese plan of battle are discussed; “Battle Diary,” a detailed narrative of the battle; and “Reckonings,” a reexamination of the myths surrounding the battle of Midway and an enlightening analysis of why the Japanese lost this historically important battle. Readers familiar with other recognized works on Midway will find a wealth of new information here. Scholars, military buffs, and serious students of the subject will appreciate the detailed, comprehensive battle diary that constitutes the bulk of the work. The text itself is supplemented with numerous maps and well executed diagrams that are extremely useful for interpreting the action. A great deal of additional information on Japanese aircraft, carriers, airmen, and aviation losses at Midway is also given, in the extensive list of appendices.

One of the most delightful aspects of this work is the emphasis that the authors place on the importance of leadership and command. I was particularly impressed by the way they compared and contrasted the personalities and leadership styles of the two main protagonists of the battle: Chester W. Nimitz, the commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, and Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, commander in chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet. Much of the book focuses on the errors committed by Yamamoto in “his schemes aimed at Midway.” Parshall and Tully are right on the money when they state that “a commander’s job is to orchestrate and direct the three major dimensions of combat—space,

time and force.” From their study they conclude that “Yamamoto’s plan [for the Midway Operation] failed to address the concept of space in a flexible manner,” that in “his attempt to be ‘divinely mysterious,’ he had rendered much of his fleet purposeless through dispersion.”

Despite its formidable strengths, the Japanese navy committed at Midway a series of irretrievable strategic, tactical, and operational mistakes that seem almost inexplicable. This forms the basis for the “unpleasant truth” of the authors’ compelling argument that “despite the Imperial Navy having opened the Pacific war with one of the most daring military feats of all time—the massed carrier attack on Pearl Harbor—neither Yamamoto nor Naval GHQ truly comprehended the strengths and weaknesses of the world-class weapons system [the aircraft carriers of the First Air Fleet] they possessed.” Lastly, scholars will appreciate Parshall and Tully’s efforts to debunk the legion of myths resulting from Midway, the most persistent being that in defeating the Japanese the U. S. Navy miraculously triumphed against overwhelming odds. This mistaken concept, as the authors rightly point out, “has been echoed endlessly in almost every American text on the battle until it has been accepted as holy writ.”

While *Shattered Sword* gets high marks all around, it is not flawless. Historians and academics accustomed to more scholarly writing may find some of the stylistic trappings somewhat disconcerting. The use of contemporary jargon and colloquialisms is, at best, misplaced. Similarly, their decision to pack the endnotes with reams of additional supporting information was unwise; further, the index is so poorly constructed as to be almost unusable. It is deplorable that the publisher, having acquired such an exceptional scholastic achievement, failed to take care of these deficiencies and so spoiled an otherwise superb book.

Unlike *Shattered Sword*, which breaks new ground, *The Unknown Battle of Midway* by Alvin Kernan merely retraces the steps of those who have come before. Kernan, a university professor of the humanities, served in the U.S. Navy during World War II as an enlisted man and was aboard the carrier *Enterprise* during the battle of Midway. The subject of this book, the destruction of U.S. torpedo planes at Midway, is a worthy project, one that warrants further inspection and analysis. If Kernan’s idea is sound, however, his execution leaves much to be desired. Readers of the *Naval War College Review* and other students of naval history will find nothing new here. On the contrary, the book is so full of errors and misconstructions of fact that it only further distorts the reasons behind the tragic slaughter of the U.S. torpedo planes and their aircrews.

Although the author was an aviation ordnanceman, he confuses the 1,949-pound Mark XIII-1 torpedo employed at Midway and the 2,216-pound Mark XIII-10 of 1944. Much of the technical information cited in this book is either outdated, inaccurate, or incorrectly analyzed (e.g., the U.S. Navy did not develop

its early warning radar from the British; U.S. aerial torpedoes did not have magnetic exploders; and the torpedo protection system is not a part of a ship's armor). The author's lack of technical expertise can be quickly discerned, and it frequently leads to errors in Kernan's analysis of the battle.

Missing is any useful analysis of U.S. carrier doctrine or discussion of the command decisions that necessitated a "maximum effort" on the part of each of the U.S. carriers present at Midway. Yes, the destruction of the American torpedo planes was tragic, but as Parshall and Tully have shown in *Shattered Sword*, the courageous attacks by the Navy's torpedo squadrons critically affected the course of this monumental battle.