

2000

Fast Tanks and Heavy Bombers: Innovation in the U.S. Army, 1917-1945

Earl H. Tilford Jr.

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

Recommended Citation

Tilford, Earl H. Jr. (2000) "Fast Tanks and Heavy Bombers: Innovation in the U.S. Army, 1917-1945," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 53 : No. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol53/iss1/16>

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.

With the Marine landing, Clemens became a special staff officer in the First Marine Division intelligence section. His narrative of life with the Marines on the beachhead and in such historic engagements as the Tenaru River, Tasimboko, and Edson's Ridge, offers the fresh perspective of one whose previous exposure to Americans had been very circumscribed. He writes of short rations, shoestring defenses, "Washing Machine Charlie," the "Let George Do It" medal, and daily life in a headquarters continually bombed, shelled, and threatened with land attack. His wonder at the spirit of the Marines—and at a traditional Thanksgiving feast after months of short rations—is genuine and profound. Also, his personal commentary on such well known figures as Alexander Vandegrift, Merritt "Red Mike" Edson, Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, and Sergeant Major Jacob Vouza adds to the flavor of the narrative. One particularly revealing comment concerned the Americans' infatuation with information. The comment was not made in a critical way, but it is interesting given today's emphasis on information operations.

The author's stated purpose is to recognize the considerable role of the islanders in the war, as well as the spirit of the Marines, who overcame tremendous adversity to make Guadalcanal free again. He meets both objectives. The book is filled with vignettes of native scouts engaging Japanese patrols,

lobbing smoke pots at enemy positions to mark targets for air strikes, and rescuing downed American pilots, all at great risk. This may be the least familiar chapter in an otherwise well known story, and it is probably the most important recent contribution to understanding the battle for Guadalcanal.

It is interesting to note that this book was first submitted for publication in the 1950s. After several attempts over the years it is only now in print. That a well told tale of high adventure by an author of unrivaled qualifications should await a publisher so long is a mystery. We have it now, however, and there is much to learn from it about the battle, the people, the spirit of making do, and winning when reason might say that winning is simply not possible.

THOMAS E. SEAL
Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps

Johnson, David E. *Fast Tanks and Heavy Bombers: Innovation in the U.S. Army, 1917–1945*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1998. 288pp. \$37.50

This well documented and convincingly argued book probes the extent to which various constituencies within the military will go to protect parochial service interests and promote narrow agendas. Looking at the Army in the interwar period, David Johnson, a senior analyst at RAND, speaks to

162 Naval War College Review

the follies of extremists in today's airpower versus land power debates. In times of technological advance when budgets are constrained, rivalries between the services for limited budget dollars intensify. The Army of the 1920s and 1930s faced not only competition with the Navy over resources but also internal struggles over spending.

Johnson argues that internal barriers within the Army and the myopia of individuals promoting single-issue constituencies contributed to the Army's lack of preparedness when war came in late 1941. The author focuses on how the Army adapted to the realities of twentieth-century warfare, analyzing responses to two emerging and maturing technologies—the tank and the airplane.

The Army, always conservative, was especially so in its infantry and cavalry branches. Accordingly, armor advocates were forced to accept the preponderant infantry notion that the primary role of tanks was to support advancing troops. Likewise, the cavalry graybeards were determined that the role of horses not be diminished by "machines." Consequently, American armored doctrine lagged behind that of the Germans. To satisfy narrow branch prerogatives, the Army developed lightly armored, fast tanks.

Airpower advocates were even more single-minded, and when war came airmen paid the price. By the early 1930s, aviators had

formed their own "service within a service," in which absolute obedience to the dogma of strategic bombing was enforced with a vengeance. To its theoreticians, the promise of technology made the past irrelevant, and the notion that it takes land armies to win wars was "obsolete." Furthermore, airpower evangelists, ever in search of facts to support their faith, manipulated history and evidence to support the efficacy of strategic bombing. The "big bomber" advocates dominated the hierarchy of the Army Air Corps, and they made sure that those who questioned them were consigned to the margins. In that era of technological advance and constrained budgets, they pushed strategic bombing as a way to fight wars with minimal bloodshed and maximum return on resources.

The result of all of this was that the U.S. Army was poorly prepared for World War II. In combat, American tanks proved no match for heavier, better armored German tanks; with their larger guns, German armor blasted them. In the air the Luftwaffe slaughtered U.S. bomber crews attempting to bring Nazi Germany to its knees through strategic bombing. Did World War II teach the airpower advocates anything? Johnson answers with a resounding "no." The advent of the atomic bomb led them to discount the fact that strategic bombing had not been decisive in World War II; they ratcheted up the rhetoric to claim that "technology has caught

up with doctrine." General Carl Spaatz and Major General Curtis LeMay proclaimed that "the future of armies has been decidedly curtailed." Although every conflict since World War II has made nonsense of that notion, airpower zealots continue to voice it.

This book is relevant to the current debate over the future of the U.S. armed forces. Recently, some airpower advocates have argued that with the advent of various precision guided munitions, "technology has caught up with doctrine" (once again), so that wars now can be won quickly, with little bloodshed, through precision strike. They simply ignore the fact that there is no historical basis to support the notion that airpower alone can win wars. With constrained budgets, advancing technologies, and results of the Nato war against Serbia to be analyzed, the debate will intensify, and the past may well provide the prologue.

EARL H. TILFORD, JR.
Strategic Studies Institute
U.S. Army War College

Sumida, Jon Tetsuro. *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered*. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; and Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997. 166pp. \$24.95

This book seeks to rediscover Alfred Thayer Mahan and to reinterpret his writings. Sumida writes that Mahan laid the foundation for modern naval history and strategy through his books on the history of sea power; his main subjects were naval grand strategy and "the art and science of command." Sumida expresses his purpose to "correct [the] widespread and long-standing misperception of his [Mahan's] treatment of these questions and thus facilitate a proper understanding of his thought."

Sumida divides his book into the following: a preface entitled "Musical Performance, Zen Enlightenment, and Naval Command"; an introduction entitled "Resolving a Paradox"; and six chapters respectively entitled "Development of Professional Purpose, Geopolitical Vision, and Historical Technique"; "Political, Political-Economic, and Governmental Argument in the 'Influence of Sea Power' series"; "Strategic and Professional Argument in the 'Influence of Sea Power' series"; "Strategic and Professional Argument in the Lesser Works"; "National, Transnational, and International Politics"; and "The Uses of History and Theory." It closes with a bibliography divided into twelve sections, a selective analytical index to Mahan's writings, and a general index. In all, this is a compact, dense interpretation of the works of the famous sailor-historian.