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REVIEW ESSAYS

Guadalcanal A Reevaluation

Wayne P. Hughes, Jr.

Grace, James W. *The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal: Night Action 13 November 1942*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1999. 234pp. \$32.95

WHEN I ATTENDED THE NAVAL ACADEMY, rooms in Bancroft Hall were named after Medal of Honor recipients, to inspire the midshipmen. One of my four years there was spent in the Daniel J. Callaghan room on the zero deck of the third wing. By the time I reported to my first ship in the fleet, USS *Cushing* (DD 797), I knew the book on Callaghan: if he had not been a former presidential aide and had not died in battle, he would have been court-martialed for incompetence. The Monday-morning quarterbacks described how the destroyer USS *Cushing* (DD 376), for which mine had been named, was literally in the midst of the Japanese before Callaghan gave the order to open fire. He was blamed for losing control of his unwieldy formation, so that in only eleven minutes in the mêlée that followed (0150–0201), five American cruisers and destroyers were fatally damaged, DD 376 among them. The following morning a sixth, the crippled light cruiser *Juneau*, was torpedoed by a submarine and sunk with great loss of life, including the five Sullivan brothers.

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In the wee hours of 13 November 1942, Rear Admiral Daniel Callaghan saved the Marines on Guadalcanal and lost his reputation. He and his force of eight destroyers and five cruisers turned back two Japanese battleships, a light cruiser, and eleven destroyers that were set on pasting Henderson Field with the battleships' fourteen-inch shells. The bombardment was to be the precursor of the decisive ground attack that would overrun U.S. Marine Corps major general A. A. Vandegrift's defensive perimeter around Henderson Field.

James Grace leaves the postmortems to others. He explains that he wrote this book as "the result of a childhood memory. . . . When I was in grade school, I read a book [saying] that while cruisers were never intended to fight battleships, that had actually happened at Guadalcanal, and the U.S. cruisers had *won*." As he gathered his facts over many years, he came to know that winning had been costly for the U.S. Navy. The wild alley-fight was the first of two intense battles set in motion by Vice Admiral William Halsey, who was determined to restore the Marine Corps' faith in the U.S. Navy, which had been lost when the Navy was crushed by the Japanese in the Battle of Savo Island and pulled out immediately after the landings in August.

The naval battle of Guadalcanal comprised two bitter engagements over the span of three nights. On the second night, the Japanese bombarded the Marines from cruisers and destroyers, while U.S. opposition consisted only of PT boats. On the climactic third night, however, Rear Admiral Willis A. Lee, with the battleships *Washington* and *South Dakota*, defeated another Japanese bombardment force, which included the battleship *Kirishima*. Though it was not yet evident to either side, the tide had turned, and Henderson Field was safe. Taken together, these three nights are the equivalent for surface warships of the three-day battle of Midway for aircraft carriers.

There is no lack of coverage on those night engagements. This book is a noteworthy addition to the literature because of the author's use of research on the U.S. and Japanese participants, research that involved interviews by phone, in person, and by mail. The bibliography lists 213 participants who were contacted.

James Grace, a retired high school teacher and Army Reserve officer, wisely avoids adding his own spin to those of many professional historians and naval officers who have concluded that the battle was badly led. Instead, he has assiduously sought out participants,

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logbooks, and historical records of both sides and has let them tell their own stories. With diagrams of the Japanese approach and tactical formations, and details of their activities, Grace permits insights from the Japanese side of things that were missing from early assessments by S. E. Morison, E. B. Potter, and other premier naval historians who denigrated Callaghan's combat leadership.

My own reappraisal of Callaghan's performance started in late 1994, with the receipt of a letter from Frank Uhlig, former editor of the *Naval War College Review*, which contained correspondence by Charles R. Haberlein of the Naval Historical Center in Washington, D.C. Haberlein's research (cited in Grace's exhaustive bibliography) includes charted ship movements, the record of all TBS (voice "talk between ships") transmissions, and USS *Helena's* radar log. Grace has added details of Japanese ship movements that were unavailable even to Haberlein. This is not the place to reply to all the charges against Callaghan and explain my own personal epiphany, but it is appropriate to show here how Grace's information helps us reassess Callaghan's performance.

Here is an example that adds to the defense of Callaghan (a defense that was never delivered, of course, because he and Norman Scott, our other flag officer present, died at their posts in the *San Francisco* and *Atlanta* early in the battle). Haberlein and others observed a mysterious jump in the approach by the Imperial Japanese Navy formation. At 0126 USS *Helena*, whose radar was the principal tracking instrument, reported large contacts (the two battleships) at fifteen miles, which appeared to give ample time for the right

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response by the tactical commander. Starting three minutes later, Callaghan turned the ships of his formation sequentially (a “corpen” maneuver) due north to cross ahead of the Japanese contacts. Seven minutes after that, while his long column was still turning, the fourth ship in line (the destroyer *O'Bannon*) reported radar contact at only seven thousand yards! Minutes later a van destroyer, probably the *Cushing*, reported visual contact on Japanese ships crossing its bow from port to starboard distant “four thousand yards at the most.” To quote Grace, seconds later “bedlam reigned,” and the American formation disintegrated. Forever after, critics said that if Callaghan had only been in the *Helena*, he would have had the picture and not lost control.

Let us first consider the facts from Grace’s account and then ask the following question: would the American ships have been better off had they held to their column and crossed ahead of the Japanese? Keep in mind that although the battle of Tassafaronga had not yet been fought, in that engagement U.S. cruisers and destroyers (facing destroyers only) would be devastated by Japanese torpedoes *because* they were in a tight, orderly column with their beams to the salvos.

Here is what Grace tells us. Coming down from the north before midnight, the Japanese passed Savo Island to port. Vice Admiral Hiroaki Abe had his ships in a relatively tight formation, ten or eleven thousand yards from van to rear. In a severe rainstorm, however, his navigator missed the turn, and the ships continued past Cape Esperance, the northwest point of Guadalcanal. Abe had to reverse course to clear the cape before he could pass east-southeast between Guadalcanal and Savo. The visibility was dreadful in the storm, and his complex double-fan-shaped formation could not easily be restored after two radical course changes. His destroyer screen fell into disarray, so that there were at least eight thousand yards between the battleships and the lead destroyers. Thus *Cushing* and three other van destroyers in the long U.S. column found themselves cutting through what they and Callaghan wrongly took to be an orderly Japanese formation. While everyone (including me) believes Callaghan should have been commanding from the *Helena* (because of its SG surface-search radar) we now see, with the aid of Grace’s details, why the Japanese ships appeared *twelve minutes* earlier than expected. Callaghan’s attempt to corpen his long, unwieldy column of thirteen ships in front of the Japanese formation was doomed to

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drive them right into the Japanese. Haberlein aptly notes that Callaghan knew he had to close for his light guns to be effective against battleships. It would have taken the greatest perspicacity, with or without a good surface-search radar at his metaphorical elbow, to be close enough but not too close.

I go farther and say that Callaghan was right to create a *mêlée*, whether or not that was his intention. No battleship wants to be surrounded by enemy cruisers and destroyers at point-blank range. Moreover, an orderly U.S. column attempting to employ guns would have been destroyed by torpedoes from, all told, eleven Japanese destroyers and a light cruiser. On our side we had unreliable torpedoes (Grace's narrative is conclusive on that score, if any doubt remains). During the event, two U.S. destroyers nearly *collided* with the lead battleship, *Hiei*, while many of our cruisers and destroyers rained shells into its topsides. By confusing both sides, Callaghan assured mission success.

A second great service done by Grace is to paint an intimate picture of what the participants saw and were thinking, from commanding officer to seaman. I have attended *Cushing* reunions and met survivors from DD 376. They do not talk much about the battle (they mostly exchange liberty-port tales), but if you draw them out, they will tell you that what they remember is about five minutes of ferocious fighting followed by interminable efforts to save the ship and then to survive in the water. Grace's picture corresponds precisely.

This book parallels C. Raymond Calhoun's *Tin Can Sailor: The Story of the USS Sterett* (reviewed in the Winter 1995 *Naval War College Review*); *Sterett* was the third ship in column that night. The reader of either book has the vicarious experience of down-and-dirty combat in all its confusion. This reviewer is sure the messiness of intense sea battle will not be dispelled by modern information technology.

A third benefit of Grace's book is that it offers a better understanding of Japanese surface combat leadership than we have had. Grace's biographical research is very useful on why the Japanese were such capable night fighters despite their inferior radar. For instance, all three of the Japanese flag officers in the battle were torpedo specialists. Surely this says much about where the Imperial Japanese Navy's emphasis lay and why the United States faced such a worthy opponent in every 1942 surface action.

I have three short footnotes. When I arrived at my conclusion that Callaghan had done well, I asked myself: what would Arleigh Burke, the premier surface tactician of the Solomons, have done differently? On one hand, the answer was “quite a bit”; on the other hand, in view of the fact that Callaghan had to block battleships by coming to close quarters, I cannot see how Burke’s tactic of hitting and standing away with small divisions would have been more successful than Callaghan’s disorganized but ferocious attack. In addition, when we outfought the Japanese in 1943, it was with the benefit of a lull of several months in which to practice new cruiser-destroyer tactics—and by then, at long last, we had torpedoes that were reliable.

Second, it was delightful to see that Grace had picked up on the effective employment of radar by Lieutenant Commander Joseph C. Wylie. “Bill” Wylie (not Joe, as Grace calls him) was executive officer of the *Fletcher*, which was in the thick of the action yet remained unscathed. After the *Fletcher* had similar success in the battle of Tassafaronga, Wylie was summoned to Pearl Harbor by the commander of the Pacific Fleet destroyer force to go to the Bureau of Ships and design the destroyer combat information center (CIC) and write its procedural doctrine. The CIC was one of those vital improvements—invisible in photos and scarcely noticed by historians—that enhanced combat performance through improved command and control as much as, say, doubling the number of weapons carried would have. A year later Wylie was the commissioning commanding officer of *Ault* (DD 698). He returned to the Pacific in time for the Iwo Jima and Okinawa operations.

Third, two survivors of *San Francisco*’s long, painful night were on duty at the U.S. Naval Academy when I returned there in 1957 to teach naval history. One was Captain Bruce McCandless, who when I knew him lived up to his reputation for professional competence and personal modesty. Lieutenant Commander McCandless’s efforts, in the shambles that remained of the *San Francisco*’s bridge, to straighten out the command situation in the American formation had won him the Medal of Honor. The other and less known survivor, Captain John Bennett, had been a mere lieutenant junior grade at the time of the engagement; he received the Navy Cross for his heroism under fire.

Bennett has done good service on Callaghan’s behalf. In two recent columns of the Surface Navy Association’s newsletter, *Surface SitRep*

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(August/September 1996 and February/March 1997), he recalled Admiral Callaghan's unflappable determination before and during the battle. Bennett is an admirer (as am I) of Richard B. Frank's book, *Guadalcanal*, but he says Frank misses the mark when he narrates the events of that famous Friday the thirteenth in 1942.

The whole three-day naval battle of Guadalcanal (especially the first bloody night) is well worth close study by anyone who wishes to see the nature of what we now call joint littoral warfare, and how land, sea, and air forces each make indispensable contributions. James Grace has contributed new insights to such a study. Maybe a side benefit will be the restoration of Dan Callaghan's reputation as a combat leader, for he commenced the final defeat of the Japanese at Guadalcanal, under the most trying of circumstances.

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