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The Japanese Submarine Force and World War II

Frank Uhlig Jr

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If Vietnam left an American legacy on this point, so did Tarawa.

Utmost Savagery is not about the Second World War. It is not even about the war in the Pacific. It is about the battle of Tarawa and its relationship to the rest of the war, its lessons and legacies, and its heroes, both Japanese and American. Although many characters leap from its pages, the most central character is a young Colonel David M. Shoup, USMC, commander of the 2nd Marine Division, who later became Commandant of the Marine Corps. Part action thriller, part war story, part detailed history, this book is everything but boring. *Utmost Savagery: The Three Days of Tarawa* is definitely bound for the Marine officer's professional reading list. It should also be of interest to any student of history, leadership, war, amphibious doctrine, planning, or operations. It will particularly enthrall anyone interested in the battle of Tarawa itself and should garner respect from other historians as well. Simply put, it's a good read.

ARTHUR A. ADKINS

Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps

Boyd, Carl, and Akihiko Yoshida. *The Japanese Submarine Force and World War II*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1995. 272pp. \$32.95

With an ever-deepening hostility of more than thirty years, earlier in this century two great fleets, one based on North America's west coast, the other on islands off Asia's east coast, faced each other across six thousand miles of salt water.

As time went on, those fleets came to resemble each other in their strategic concepts, the nature of the forces of which they were composed, and their combatant strengths. Among other things both fleets, those of the United States and Japan, had powerful submarine forces, made up of long-range, fast (on the surface) boats. Those submarines were intended to seek out the opponent's fleet, report on it, ambush it, and in all ways contribute to its destruction before, during, and after the anticipated decisive battle between the rival fleets. Secretly and independently, each fleet agreed with the other that the decisive action would take place in the waters between Japan, the Marianas, and the Philippines. As it turned out, before the end of the anticipated war, which began in 1941, there would not be one great battle between the fleets in those waters, but two. Both came in 1944.

The opposing submarine forces took part in both battles, but with markedly different results for each. Indeed, by the time those battles took place the fortunes of the two submarine forces had already been decided. As its title makes plain, this book is about one of those forces.

When the war began, Japan's submarine fleet consisted of ships that were larger, faster (on the surface), and better armed than those of the Americans. Though the United States had many more submarines than the Japanese, on average Japan's ships were more modern and, unlike the Americans', all of them were in the Pacific. Carl Boyd and Akihiko Yoshida tell us that when Japan's carriers attacked the dangerously exposed ships of the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, twenty-five of Japan's submarines were deployed north, south, east, and west of that harbor in order to attack whatever

U.S. ships sailed into or out of it. Five of them carried two-man minisubs intended to get inside the harbor and attack the unsuspecting Americans from under the water, while the carriers' planes attacked from above.

The aviators did their share of the job well. The submariners failed almost totally. In the next year Japan's submariners had a few good moments, notably one day in September when the *I-19*, on a picket line southeast of Guadalcanal, with one salvo of six torpedoes sank the carrier *Wasp*, fatally damaged the destroyer *O'Brien*, and sent the battleship *North Carolina* into drydock for repair. On the whole, however, that powerful force accomplished much less than it had expected of itself. That same year the U.S. submariners' record was even more depressing.

But on the war's first day, the Chief of Naval Operations had expanded the U.S. submariners' operational concept to include unrestricted warfare against enemy shipping. It took the American submariners more than a year to overcome their difficulties, which lay chiefly with faulty weapons and a too-cautious tactical doctrine. When those shortcomings were finally made good, U.S. submarines sank so many enemy merchant and fighting ships that they set the conditions under which for the rest of the war opposing air, surface, and ground forces would fight.

As Boyd and Yoshida make clear, though the Japanese certainly sank Allied merchant ships, especially in the Indian Ocean, the high command never expanded the submarine fleet's operational concept so as to focus on American logistical shipping. Rather, when there was no big battle in immediate prospect, the

commanders responded to the destruction of their own shipping by using their submarines as transports and cargo ships. The chief result was that their submarine losses increased.

In fact, because Japan's fleet in general was unpracticed in antisubmarine warfare (ASW), its submariners were unprepared to deal with American ASW. They seemed never to learn, and as a result, no matter what kind of mission they were on, they perished rapidly while achieving little. Moreover, the United States was more successful in penetrating its foe's radio communications than were the Japanese, and that imbalance cost the Japanese submarine force dearly.

Thus, during the first of the long-anticipated "decisive" battles, which took place in June 1944, while U.S. submarines not only effectively scouted out the Japanese fleet but sank two carriers at no cost to themselves, the Japanese submarines in contrast never saw the American fleet yet lost eight of their number. At the second of the battles, in October, U.S. submarines again served effectively both as scouts and as sinkers of enemy warships. Yet even with an improved tactical doctrine Japan's submarines again failed miserably, albeit expensively.

In the final weeks of the war, Japan's submariners had their first important success in nearly two years when the *I-58* chanced upon and sank a lone American cruiser, the USS *Indianapolis*. However, by that time their efforts had been focused for months on constructing hordes of minisubs with which to defend the country from the American invasion fleets, and on building a few supersized submarines able to launch aircraft with which to bomb the Panama Canal. Little came of the first of these efforts and nothing of the second.

Professor Boyd and Captain Yoshida, a retired officer of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force, tell their story about the Imperial Japanese Navy's submarine force—formidable in prospect, forlorn in retrospect—economically and effectively. In doing so they miss almost nothing of importance. Moreover, they provide a number of helpful appendices.

Boyd and Yoshida have written a book worth owning.

FRANK UHLIG, JR.
Naval War College

Ponting, Clive. *Armageddon: The Reality behind the Distortions, Myths, Lies, and Illusions of World War II*. New York: Random House, 1995. 376pp. \$27.50

Anyone who has delved into the vast collection of works on World War II can tell you his or her favorite books, perhaps volumes that uniquely describe the reality of combat, the intricacies of strategy, or the complexities of politics. Other works effortlessly transport the reader into the lives and deaths of men and women in every theater, every nation, every unit of the global conflict. Finally, there are books that reveal the role of the human intellect as well as the human heart in great technical or moral achievements, as well as in unspeakable savagery. This is not one of any of those kinds of books.

Armageddon is a revisionist tale, told by an individual who seems to have nothing but contempt for every leader and nation that engaged in that terrible war. Clive Ponting is described on the dust jacket as a professor of politics at the

University of Swansea, Wales, and a former assistant secretary at the Ministry of Defence under Margaret Thatcher. No other credentials or background is offered, and truthfully, no other data is needed, since the book lacks even the pretense of scholarship.

The author's basic method is to blend statistics with selected events to create an "impersonal" point of view. Ponting omits discussion of any military aspects of the war. In the preface he states that "there is little here on the detailed tactical handling of forces by military commanders, or maps and descriptions of particular battles. These have been exhaustively covered elsewhere and tell us little about the reality of the war" (emphasis added). Instead, the author takes a more remote and narrow perspective on the war, in which Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin are described as shrewd barbarians while Roosevelt is seen as an opportunistic political hack and Churchill as a prevaricator. This is akin to today's shoddy "gotcha journalism," not reputable history.

In this new telling of World War II, Britain and France are seen as cynically declaring war on Germany to preserve the status quo of their ill gotten imperial empires, not to stand alongside a nation being raped by Hitler. Germany, Italy, Japan (and also the Soviet Union) were "revisionist powers" that sought to change the world as it had stood for over a century. Ponting is more vague about the United States, although he does describe the critical role played by its overwhelming economic power. He also eschews any perspective concerning the *realpolitik* that drove many Allied contingency decisions at the senior levels. The well known political divergences among the Allies are retold with relish, especially if Ponting can claim that