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The Lost Ships of Guadalcanal

Frank Uhlig Jr.

Robert B. Ballard

Rick Archbold

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(the expeditionary force commander) as a combat commander begun in *The First Team* continues, as Lundstrom dissects the admiral's decision to withdraw his three carriers to the waters immediately south of Guadalcanal on 8 August. While some recent authors attribute this to cowardice, Lundstrom sifts carefully through often ignored message traffic, showing that bad communications robbed Fletcher of the important information he needed to make informed decisions. Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner (the amphibious commander) had originally assured Fletcher that the unloading of the transports would proceed on schedule, but his later message canceling the planned withdrawal of his transports and cargo ships never reached the expeditionary force commander. Unaware of Turner's difficulties, Fletcher thus had no compunction about steaming to safer waters south of Guadalcanal (not, the author notes, as far as San Francisco). In that connection, Lundstrom shows that Fletcher, often maligned as an unimaginative surface sailor who never consulted aviators, received concurrence in the decision to withdraw temporarily from Rear Admiral Leigh Noyes, one of his task group commanders, and from Captain Dewitt C. Ramsey, *Saratoga's* commanding officer—both experienced aviators.

Some individuals have accused Fletcher of being over-solicitous of the welfare of his three fleet carriers. Virtually unable to replenish the lost men or planes in the wake of the fierce Japanese reaction to WATCHTOWER (7 and 8 August), Fletcher was forced to contemplate the possibility of wielding a

dwindling number of Wildcat fighters to defend not only his own carriers (themselves a priceless commodity) but the expeditionary force. The "First Team" had no second team to back it up. By wisely husbanding the Pacific Fleet's carriers, Lundstrom argues persuasively, Frank Jack Fletcher quite possibly saved Guadalcanal.

Ample and clearly drawn maps and formation diagrams, as well as seldom-seen photographs, complement the text, but a "dappled" effect mars some of the pictures. Ship nomenclature purists might blanch at *Atlanta* (CL 51)—class light cruisers being consistently referred to as "AA cruisers" (they were conceived as destroyer flotilla leaders but, with their potent dual-purpose five-inch batteries, came to be employed to advantage in screening carrier task forces). Two incorrect hull numbers (probably an editorial lapse) and one misspelled ship name (*Trevor* should be *Trever*) appear in the text.

The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign's strengths, however, far outweigh its exceedingly minor faults, and the book commands respect for its thorough research and clear prose. It deserves a prominent place on the reading list of anyone seeking to understand the Navy's role at Guadalcanal. There is nothing that matches it.

ROBERT J. CRESSMAN
Rockville, Maryland

Ballard, Robert B. and Archbold, Rick.
The Lost Ships of Guadalcanal. New
York: Warner, 1993. 228pp. \$39.95

Robert Ballard, one of the great under-sea explorers of our time, in company with Rick Archbold, Canadian editor and writer, marine artist Ken Marshall, photographer Michael McCoy, and others, offers us a book which only a few years ago would have been beyond our ability to create.

To help mark the fiftieth anniversary of the unexpected and remarkable struggle for Guadalcanal in 1942, Ballard and his team journeyed to that distant jungle island. In the depths of Ironbottom Sound just off Guadalcanal they discovered, photographed, and illustrated the wrecks of a dozen warships once belonging to three blue-water navies: the United States, Australia, and Japan. Twelve is not the full number of fighting ships littering the bottom of the dreadful place; fifty is nearer the mark.

Those ships were parts of fleets that had expected to fight at horizon-spanning distances far from any substantial piece of land. But Guadalcanal is the size of Long Island, New York, and it is not the only large island in the Solomon archipelago. What brought all those ships to this place so far from the direct route between the United States and Japan? What led them to fight savage night battles at ranges of four miles, one mile, and less, mostly without the help of radar?

It all had to do with an airfield the Japanese were building from which scouts and bombers could seek out and attack U.S. convoys bound for Australia. In August 1942 the U.S. Marines seized the airfield, and for the next six months the Japanese struggled to regain it, the Americans to retain it. The warships went there to ensure that

friendly troop and supply ships could reach the island with their passengers and cargo, and that the enemy's troop and supply ships could not.

By day, aircraft dominated the scene and fought many a battle, including two of the world's half-dozen carrier duels, in the long contest over whose ships would reach the contested island and whose would not. Yet between dusk and dawn most combat planes were on deck or on the ground. Until dawn, then, the struggle moved to the water's surface, where men—no one of whom could have been prepared for what he had to face—fought their brief and deadly actions, the most obvious result of which was the destruction of all those ships and the death of thousands of men. The other chief result was that the American troop and supply ships could reach the island and unload their passengers and cargo, while most of Japan's ships perished. And so the island passed into American hands. It was the first piece of Allied territory recovered from the Japanese conquerors.

When those ships sank long ago we thought of them as gone forever. However, with modern submersibles, navigational devices, and photographic gear, those sunken ships are revealed as gone only to another place. All have been transformed by battle and by time into broken likenesses of their former selves. Sometimes in the darkness of the depths it is too hard to tell which wreck was once which ship.

The team (which included Charles Haberlein, Jr., of the U.S. Naval Historical Center and Richard B. Frank, author of an excellent book on Guadalcanal) provides a brief, clear,

and accurate account of each battle, well illustrated by photographs of the men, the ships, and the battles. What puts this book in a class by itself, however, is the views of some of the surviving men, and especially of the wrecked ships, as they appear today.

FRANK UHLIG, JR.
Naval War College

Hallas, James H. *The Devil's Anvil: The Assault on Peleliu*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994. 297pp. \$27.50

Names such as Guadalcanal, Tarawa, and Iwo Jima usually conjure up scenes of carnage, and levels of destruction, beyond comprehension. For some reason, perhaps because of long-awaited advances in the Philippines or events in Europe, the landing and conquest of Peleliu never received the same degree of attention. From James Hallas's history, one can only conclude that the battle was as frightful as any of the Pacific campaigns and deserves our attention and study.

The Devil's Anvil covers the complete story of the landing on Peleliu, from the initial planning through the mop-up and occupation. While inspiration for the seizure of the Palaus sprang from the perceived need to protect the reconquest of the Philippines and had both MacArthur's and Nimitz's approval, the action was not unanimously supported. As Hallas notes, it was surprising and worrisome that Admiral William ("Bull") Halsey, commander of the Western Pacific Task Forces and an aggressive and hard-driving fighter, objected to the proposed

landing, insisting that there would be a "prohibitive price in casualties." Halsey believed that Ulithi, with its deep-water harbor, was the only island of the Palau group worth seizing. His objections noted, planning for landing the 1st Marine Division went ahead. In contrast to Halsey, General William Rupertus, commander of the 1st Marine Division, predicted that the campaign would be "rough but fast." He was woefully mistaken. It took the veterans of Guadalcanal and Cape Gloucester over two months to secure that small piece of coral.

The bulk of this work is a day-by-day account of the battle for Peleliu from the vantage point of private infantrymen. Extensive interviews with survivors provided Hallas with a huge amount of graphic detail, which he skillfully uses to bring the horror of island combat home to the reader. No one could read about Company K holding "the Point" through sheer willpower, or assault after assault by exhausted troops on Bloody Nose Ridge and the Umurbrogel, and not be deeply affected. Pages of ghastly, poignant vignettes have an almost numbing effect. That anyone survived is astonishing.

Central to the story is the 1st Marine Regiment, commanded by the legendary Lewis B. ("Chesty") Puller, who had joined the Corps in 1918, earned three Navy Crosses, and had a reputation as a fearless warrior. Yet he was considerably less sanguine than his commanding officer, General Rupertus, on the prospects for a quick campaign. The numbers alone gave him pause: roughly 10,500 Japanese defenders, many of them elite Imperial troops, would face