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The Battle of Cape Esperance: Encounter at Guadalcanal

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BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

“A Brilliant Blunder”

Cook, Charles. *The Battle of Cape Esperance: Encounter at Guadalcanal*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1992. 156pp. \$24.95

THIS COMPETENT LITTLE BOOK is a reprint that the Naval Institute Press brought out last year to honor the fiftieth anniversary of one of the most intriguing battles of the Solomons Campaign. This is a rich work because it was written by one who, as a young officer in the USS *Helena*, took part in the battle.

Operations in the Solomons in 1942–43 are probably the most instructive history a naval officer can study today, for they were the archetype of “joint littoral warfare,” which is so central to naval planning today. The surface battles were fought in waters surrounded by islands, and the survival of the small ships that fought in them was of less value than the mission to sustain the forces ashore. As others have, Cook describes for us how the Japanese were compelled to reinforce their troops on Guadalcanal at night and the Americans to do the same thing during daytime, because our aircraft from Henderson Field dominated the Solomon Island chain in daylight hours, while at night their warships ruled. It was in the dark that the Japanese goblins did their mischief: we called them the “Tokyo Express” when they roared in to wreak havoc on land and sea. Cook has a neat phrase for the way the reinforcements had to be brought to Guadalcanal: “The methods used by both sides were those of blockade-runners.”

Starting with Cape Esperance, our American ghost-busters tried to derail the Tokyo Express, but the Japanese were the experts and we were the amateurs in night littoral warfare, and it took us a while to adapt to this new form of naval combat. I wonder how soon we will see similar covert deliveries of vital cargoes, and also inshore combat sweeps with “minor” surface forces exploiting low-observable technology, with heavy losses on both sides to the modern missiles that

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will play the brutal, abrupt, decisive role played fifty years ago by torpedoes. I cannot but believe this is ancient history that we will suffer again.

The best books on naval tactics have been written by naval officers. The participants are the ones who can put you in the battle, living what they saw and felt: determination amidst confusion; a clutch of fear, but principally a full shot of adrenalin; and (especially during the first blood-letting for nearly all Americans) a sort of innocence, born of ignorance. Cook is vivid with his word-pictures. You can almost smell the jungle a few miles to port and starboard, see the cloud cover that blackened the seas, and feel the torrential rain that messed up both radar and visual acuity. Cook puts you in the cockpit of the scout plane that burst into flame right off the *Salt Lake City's* catapult and the rubber raft of the aircrew as, long after the fighting was over, they struggled to survive. He shows what a night battle is like: a few ear-splitting minutes of fire, a momentary crash when shells or a torpedo explode into the hull, and then hours of the hardest work imaginable while trying to keep a battered hull afloat.

To reconstruct the action, Cook fairly takes the battle reports and investigation as fact. His postmortem corresponds with the consensus: the battle was for the U.S. Navy a missed opportunity to obliterate an enemy. It was a greater embarrassment for the Japanese, who were totally surprised and unprepared—a rare occasion indeed. Cook will lead you through the often startling events that raced in front of the minds of Rear Admiral Norman Scott and his nine commanding officers. He does not stint to tell you of ships seen to blow up, their propellers twirling in the air, where on reconstruction no ship could have been, or of a ship that never seems to have existed, despite more than one on the bridge of the flagship *San Francisco* who saw her pass close aboard from starboard to port.

The battle of Cape Esperance was the first surface engagement after the American debacle of Savo Island, which Scott had viewed from an unengaged vantage point. At Cape Esperance the cruiser *Helena* detected the Japanese at fourteen miles. But due to a few devilish misunderstandings, the Japanese were at less than three miles when she opened fire; as he waited anxiously, an ensign in the *Helena* asked, "Do we plan to board them?!" And when the *Helena* finally opened fire it was a "mistake"—well, a mistake in Scott's mind at least, as he stood on his bridge trying to make sense of a situation he was supposed to command.

I must leave the complex of circumstances that led to a near-boarding situation for the instructive study of the book. The battle is pure bounty in revealing to us what not to do. I say this having the same sympathy with which Cook puts us in the battle—for Scott, for Captain Hoover of the *Helena*, and the rest of the ship captains, all competent tacticians thrust into circumstances for which they were untrained and unprepared. Furthermore, *it would happen again*, until the end of 1942, when we put behind us the leisurely experience of prewar tactical

wargaming at the Naval War College. In 1943, the likes of Stanton "Tip" Merrill, Frederick Moosbrugger, and Arleigh Burke saw how the new environment called for new tactics that would marry our radar advantage over the enemy with torpedo salvos, and then stole time to train up for night fighting at six-hundred-yard intervals and thirty knots through the water.

The story of how it came to pass that the entire American column, including Scott's flagship, would open fire as a stunning surprise for the officer in tactical command is so delicious that it is worth recounting. And the story is still timely because in some perverse fashion it will happen again, even with—perhaps because of—all the paraphernalia of modern communications. It is a lesson not to be lost on any officer, junior and senior, in the fleet today. In late 1942, the power of control by voice radio (TBS) was grasped, but some procedural bugs were big enough to bite back. One in general was the lack of voice discipline. In particular, there was an ambiguity over the letter *R*, phonetically pronounced "roger." The word "roger" indicated receipt of a signal, but in the *General Signal Book* the letter *R* also meant "commence firing." As the Japanese rushed toward Scott's force, most of his ships picked them up and locked on with fire control radar. Scott, meanwhile, had ample contact reports but was fearful that the contacts were two or three of his own destroyers and held his fire, even as the Japanese thundered to within six thousand yards. By then Hoover in the *Helena* knew that something was amiss in the flagship. On TBS he sent "Interrogatory roger" along with a specific request for acknowledgement—for a "roger." He was requesting permission to open fire. Scott's staff "rogered," meaning "We got it." However, in less than sixty seconds Hoover repeated "Interrogatory roger," skipping the request for acknowledgement. The flag automatically "rogered" again.

I like to think that Hoover knew exactly what he was doing and took advantage of the ambiguity. As Cook describes it: "At once the night erupted in explosions! Scott looked aft in astonishment. Bright flashes were leaping from the starboard side of the column. . . . Then suddenly a blinding light smote Scott's eyes and a deafening concussion slapped his face and left his ears ringing wildly. *San Francisco* had opened fire! For a moment someone else seemed to be in command of Task Group 64.2."

Happily for the Americans, Rear Admiral Goto, the Japanese tactical commander, was even more astonished than Scott, and paid with his life. His ships, in short columns abreast, pivoted and fled, throwing a few torpedoes and shells over the shoulder. American torpedoes, which offered the best chance for doing damage, though we didn't know it yet—in fact did no damage. What might have been revenge for the Battle of Savo Island was instead a modest victory and a tactical mess.

We learned many lessons, but their effect was muted because we thought we had done more damage to the enemy than we had. One side-benefit of our

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falsely optimistic assessment of damage to the Japanese was this: it restored the U.S. Navy's morale that had been deeply depressed by Savo Island.

Captain Hoover won the Navy Cross, but the citation made no mention that he had opened fire without authorization. It was a brilliant blunder.

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Warner, Denis; Warner, Peggy; with Seno, Sadao. *Disaster in the Pacific: New Light on the Battle of Savo Island*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1992. 298pp. \$26.95

In the early hours of 9 August 1942, a Japanese cruiser-destroyer group attacked and defeated a numerically superior force of American and Australian units that had provided cover for the Allied landings in the Solomon Islands. The Japanese success was a deep shock to the Allied navies, who had underestimated both the Imperial Japanese Navy's (IJN) proficiency at night fighting and its willingness to take risks to achieve tactical surprise. Misjudgments over threat assessments, a lack of group tactical training (particularly in night fighting), and the weariness amongst personnel resulting from many days spent closed-up in action stations had made the Allied ships vulnerable. In the course of the battle, four heavy cruisers were sunk and other units were damaged by the Japanese with little loss to themselves.

Several areas of controversy still remain in the wake of the action off

Savo Island, and Denis and Peggy Warner have attempted to produce a comprehensive treatment of that action and settle the points in dispute. Their narrative focuses particularly on the warning given to the naval forces by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Hudson reconnaissance bomber scouting aircraft, who have been accused of failing to pass to the proper commands, and with the appropriate priority, the sighting reports of the Japanese forces they had made the previous day.

The Warners have devoted considerable space to the activities of the Hudsons. Their narratives of this element and of the battle proper indicate lengthy research of the battle reports and a clear intent to let the witnesses to the action speak clear. Their laudable inclusion of the Japanese element, with the help of Commander Sadao Seno, is further evidence of their attempt to provide a complete record.

Disaster in the Pacific, however, suffers from structural problems that seem to be the result of inadequate