

1989

The Little Giants

Dale L. Ward

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

Recommended Citation

Ward, Dale L. (1989) "The Little Giants," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 42 : No. 1 , Article 23.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol42/iss1/23>

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.

role as important as, though less glamorous than, the pilots. Townsend skillfully weaves in the parallel story of the discovery of the German Knickebein navigational and blind bombing system (a precursor to today's VOR system) with the development, by British scientists, of countermeasures such as Headache and Aspirin which, with the development of radar, was so critical to the outcome of this first "Wizard War." These were so successful in some cases that German aircraft landed at British airfields thinking that they were in France.

Townsend also tells the story of the people on the ground, the citizens of London who bore the worst of the casualties with nothing but their indomitable spirit to sustain them. London families such as the Cal-lows—father, mother, four daughters, and two sons—worked through the blitz in the Woolwich arsenal and served as auxiliary firefighters. In Townsend's words, "They were the mainstay of Britain's night defenses."

As the Second World War recedes in memory and the last of the distinguished veterans, such as Peter Townsend, write their memoirs, the tone of these memoirs changes. There is little enthusiasm for the glamour of war in this book. Townsend's work reflects the destructive futility of the bombing campaigns of which so much had been expected by their proponents, Douhet, Mitchell, and Trenchard, during the decades before the war. He does have some professional regard for the skill and

courage of the German airmen and notes the cruel anomaly that led sober young men of courage to rain bombs upon innocents on the ground.

FRANK C. MAHNCKE
The Naval Surface Weapons Center
Silver Spring, Maryland

Y'Blood, William T. *The Little Giants*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1987. 468pp. \$28.95

This book is an excellent follow-on to the author's fine work, *Hunter-Killer*. One may well ask what William T. Y'Blood, a post-World War II Air Force B-47 flier and later a commercial 727 pilot, is doing writing about a segment of naval aviation as highly specialized as the CVEs. Currently a military historian for the U.S. Air Force, Dr. Y'Blood's book reveals his intense interest in, and deep understanding of, carrier warfare.

The saga of the Navy's escort carrier operations in the Pacific is narrated in a chronological fashion that some readers without aircraft carrier experience may find a bit laborious. Those who do have such a background probably will find *Little Giants* revealing and exciting. No attempt was made by the author to discuss in detail such points as the standards of construction used in the building of the CVEs, or the merits of the manner in which these little giants were employed in combat. Such judgments are left to the reader who, if so inclined, must be careful to stay in the context of the period

the book covers. The volume includes an unusually complete documentation with notes, index, photographs, maps, and bibliography.

The account of the *Liscome Bay* in the prologue is a case in point. Launched in April and commissioned in August 1943, the ship was sunk in November of that same year by a single Japanese torpedo which hit "in the worst possible spot—the bomb storage area. This most combustible area had no protection against a torpedo hit or fragment damage." The resulting detonation of the ship's own bombs blew it apart, and it sank in 23 minutes. Five hundred and forty-four souls were lost, including Admiral Henry M. Mullinnix, commander of the escort carrier group, and Captain Irving D. Wiltsie, the ship's skipper. Thus, the elation one feels over the ability of American industry to turn out 50 such complex ships so rapidly is tempered quickly by this loss of life, which leaves a question about the wisdom of constructing a combat ship of such vulnerability even under the extreme wartime pressures existing at the time.

In the discussion of the Battle off Samar, the reader is left to challenge the decision of the commander of Task Force 38 to withdraw from covering the amphibious landing on Leyte and, with all of the task force, to pursue the Japanese decoy carriers, leaving the vulnerable amphibious units inadequately protected. This battle also reveals the deceptive ingenuity of the Japanese as well as,

in this particular case, their lack of tenacity that allowed the American forces to escape with a distressing rather than a catastrophic loss of ships and sailors.

Showing a fine sensitivity to the individual human element in the CVE Pacific operations, Dr. Y'Blood's account does not limit itself only to the upper echelons of command or rank. Rather, he reveals a deep insight into the all too often overlooked valor of the men in the lower ranks with specific examples. It required uncommon courage for the sailors in these "Combustible, Vulnerable, Expendable" ships to face down the enemy, especially the kamikazes. But, confront the enemy they did, all the while showing pride in their "baby flattops." One example of such feeling is clearly shown by the men of the *Gambier Bay* who, after abandoning ship, cheered in salute as their ship slowly sank into the depths of the sea, even while at the same time the attacking Japanese ships were bearing down on their positions in the water.

The reader, especially if he happens to have had CVE experience in the Korean war, may wonder why the author did not add another chapter to include those operations. I had, and I do. Nevertheless, *The Little Giants* is well worth reading, for it brings to light a little known, almost forgotten part of the U.S. Navy's operations in the Pacific during World War II. Dr. Y'Blood is to be congratulated for capturing the essence of the activities of the escort aircraft carriers. "Little"

though they were, they were veritable "Giants" in action.

DALE L. WARD
Stratford, Connecticut

Nichols, David, ed. *Ernie's War: The Best of Ernie Pyle's World War II Dispatches*. New York: Random House, 1986. 432pp. \$19.95

If anyone told the story of the American soldier in the front lines, it was Ernie Pyle. Born in Indiana, he attended the journalism school at Indiana University and eventually settled in New Mexico. Pyle, like millions of other Americans, went off to war in 1941, but unlike most Americans, he had a choice of where he wanted to go, and he chose the center of action, wherever that might be. First it was the blitz in London and later up front where "The danger comes in spurts. The discomfort is perpetual. You're always cold and almost always dirty. Outside of food and cigarettes you have absolutely none of the little things that made life normal back home. You don't have chairs, lights, floors or tables. You don't have any place to set anything, or any store to buy things from. There are no newspapers, milk, beds, sheets, radiators, beer, ice cream, or hot water. You just sort of exist, either standing up working or lying down asleep. There is no pleasant in-between. The velvet is all gone from living."

As David Nichols shows us, Pyle would write about his days in the

U.S.S. *Cabot* when that carrier and others struck the heartland of Japan, and about the XXth Air Force with its B-29s making the long haul from Saipan to Japan, and about the support troops so necessary for the rapid, mechanized warfare in the West. But, his heart was with the man on the ground at the front.

Nichols shows Pyle to be both fascinated by war and repelled by it. But there is nothing new or unusual about that. Often he wrote of wanting to get away from the front, the hardship of it, and the death that continually stalked those whose lot it was to be there. He worried about his marriage that had gone bad and needed his attention. Pyle appeared not to know just what to do about any of his dilemmas. Problems unsolved, he died on Le Shima while reporting on the 77th Infantry Division. His former wife would later commit suicide.

The editor has included some of Pyle's best known works. His articles supporting combat pay, later called the Pyle Act, are there. So is "The Death of Captain Waskow." This piece also was a part of *Here is Your War: The Story of G. I. Joe* and was the poignant ending to the movie, *The Story of G. I. Joe*. Ernie had written it while in Algiers. The Battle of San Pietro would be immortalized by that piece.

Pyle's writings today are as interesting and "lively," as they must have been during the war. There is that human touch and you quickly begin to know the men he writes about. (There also were