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"The Ghost That Died at Sunda Strait," "The Last Battle Station: The Saga of the U.S.S. Houston"

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useful space on the general reader's bookshelf.

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Winslow, W.G. *The Ghost That Died at Sunda Strait*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1984. 184pp. \$21.95

Schultz, Duane. *The Last Battle Station: The Saga of the U.S.S. Houston*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985. 248pp. \$19.95

One of the major and enduring principles of strategy is that, at times, a military force must accept a tactical defeat in order to advance the objectives and interests of national policy, or national or grand strategy. This principle was clearly brought out by the destruction of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet in three months of disaster from December 1941 to March 1942.

As many recent books have pointed out, 1941 was a period of grave anxiety and uncertainty as the U.S. Government strove to support beleaguered Britain and the Soviet Union in Europe and the North Atlantic, and at the same time reinforce our desperately weak Asiatic Fleet and Philippine defenses in anticipation of a Japanese attack.

In 1941 the officers of that fleet were well aware of the danger they faced and the sacrifice that would be expected. But they did, however, feel confident that they could greatly delay any Japanese assault and in so

doing, exact a heavy toll of the attacking forces. This illusion was shattered by a succession of unexpected disasters wholly beyond control of the fleet and its able and respected Commander in Chief Adm. Thomas C. Hart.

Listed briefly these were: the destruction of the Pacific Fleet's ability to support the Asiatic Fleet by the Pearl Harbor attack; the abject failure of the U.S. Army Air Force, whose fighters and bombers were destroyed on the ground nine hours after the word of Pearl Harbor had come; the collapse of the British defence of Malaya and the sinking of the H.M.S. *Prince of Wales* and the H.M.S. *Repulse*; the dismal failure of the torpedoes of the highly trained and ready U.S. submarines to hit and explode; the faulty 5-inch anti-aircraft ammunition loaded in the U.S.S. *Houston*; and finally the grounding and severe damage to the only really modern U.S. ship in the area, the cruiser *Boise*, in Sape Strait.

It is difficult for those who first went to sea in 1943 or later to imagine fighting at night in restricted waters without radar. Yet that was what the Asiatic ships did. They and their planes and their submarines fought on tenaciously until the final climactic night of 28 February when the U.S.S. *Houston* and the H.M.A.S. *Perth* were sunk in Sunda Strait as they battled the Japanese forces moving in to land on Java. That same night, under the same brilliant full moon, four old 4-pipe U.S. destroyers, the last remnants of Dutch Admiral Doorman's striking force in

the battle of Java Sea on 27 February successfully fought their way out through Bali Strait about 500 miles to the east and steamed south to Fremantle, Australia.

In all naval history there is no record of any ship, captain, or crew that ever fought more gallantly than the U.S. heavy cruiser *Houston* under Capt. Albert H. Rooks. Nor did any survivors of sea battles endure more savage privation and abuse than the 285 officers and men, of the original 1,045 of the *Houston*, in their three and one-half years imprisonment.

As must be expected in relating the story of a series of intense combats, the two authors give somewhat differing accounts of events. These differences, however, are primarily in the emphasis of detail rather than in the major facts. Both books reflect extensive research in the official reports of the U.S., British and Australian Navies and on the oral written accounts of the survivors of the campaign. Winslow's book, however, has greater coherence and authenticity because he was writing on the basis of his personal experience and the notes he was able secretly to maintain during his years as a prisoner. Schultz, on the other hand, has written wholly from the same records as Winslow and personal interviews with survivors. *The Last Battle Station* therefore lacks the intensity of *The Ghost*.

While both authors note the paucity of Japanese reports, Winslow presents convincing evidence that the Japanese both in Java Sea and Sunda Strait suffered much greater

damage than they ever admitted. Both give harrowing accounts of the survivors' desperate struggles for life in the waters of Sunda Strait as the *Houston* finally sank with a few machine guns still firing. Schultz' account has a few factual errors, for instance, the statement that the availability of dye-loaded 8-inch shells was a secret. In fact, such shells were in common use by all U.S. battleships and cruisers in the 1930s.

Winslow's book has the advantages of full and informative appendixes giving the organization and commanding officers of the Asiatic Fleet and a full roster of the *Houston* with the rank, rating and fate of each man. All in all it is better edited and printed. Nevertheless Schultz has written an excellent book which confirms and significantly extends the contents of *The Ghost*. Both describe the long hours of swimming or paddling on rafts as one by one the weaker men slipped under water.

Winslow forcefully and clearly describes the horrible conditions and brutal treatment the Japanese inflicted on the prisoners from the *Houston* and other allied forces. Schultz graphically describes the details of individuals' struggles to survive. Surprisingly, he writes about inequalities in the conditions of British and American prisoners at Changi on the island of Singapore that caused friction and some fights among prisoners. After Changi, 220 *Houston* officers and men, together with British, Australian and Dutch prisoners, were shipped to Burma, where under appalling conditions and exceptional brutality they

helped to build "The Bridge over the River Kwai."

In conclusion, two quotations illustrate the irony, paradox and unpredictability of a world of continuing human conflict, and the enduring greatness and nobility of the human spirit.

The first from a February 1986 letter from a military historian and political scientist:

Japan is now winning the Battle for Kentucky. We are being colonized by Japan When Toyota decided to build its major new plant in this area, I was suddenly swamped by demands from the local business community to provide instruction in how to get along with our new Japanese business neighbors.

The second from p. 141 of Winslow's book:

. . . Seconds later the *Houston's* courageous captain expired. They covered him with a blanket and then helped a wounded signalman over the side.

Smith and Levitt were about to abandon ship, when looking back they were astonished to see someone sitting cross-legged on the deck cradling the captain's body in his arms. They returned to find the captain's plump Chinese steward, Ah Fong, good naturedly known to all hands as Buda. The ensigns implored him to leave the sinking ship, but he ignored them. Rocking slowly back and forth he held Captain Rooks as though he were a little boy asleep, and in a voice over-

burdened with sorrow repeated over and over, "Captain die, *Houston* die, Buda die too." He went down with the ship.

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Potter, Elmer B. *Bull Halsey*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1985. 421pp. \$19.95

E.B. Potter's biography of Fleet Admiral William F. Halsey is an inspired and dynamic volume bringing new life to World War II and the Navy's accomplishments therein. By mainly objective reporting and careful documentation the author makes it possible for readers to reach their own conclusions concerning Admiral Halsey and his role as the number one seagoing hero of the Pacific. There are two principal exceptions to this objectivity. Potter is almost flat-footed in his reaction to Spruance's handling of the Fifth Fleet at Saipan (condemnatory of his not advancing against the Japanese Fleet), and too liberal in his justification of Halsey at the Battle of Leyte Gulf. That neither was an "open and shut" situation can be accepted, but the recitals are a little too pat for the *points* of view expressed.

We are fortunate to have a biographer of Mr. Potter's ability to address such a colorful and controversial major historical figure. Halsey's autobiography was too close to WWII and too subjective to do justice to his own brilliant career. Potter, having done both a naval history of WWII