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The Fleet the Gods Forgot: The U.S. Asiatic Fleet in World War II

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Winslow, W.G. *The Fleet the Gods Forgot: The U.S. Asiatic Fleet in World War II*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1982. 327pp. \$21.95

Captain Winslow's book documents the demise of the Asiatic Fleet at the onset of World War II. It is a history of inglorious tactical failures and planning shortfalls dramatically contrasted with accounts of personal courage, determination, and heroic achievements by men fighting against overwhelming odds.

The Fleet the Gods Forgot, unlike most World War II histories, is not a single story chronologically following the progress of a battle plan towards its objective. It is a collection of accounts about various units of this ill-fated fleet which, though undeniably interrelated, are each distinctly different, not separate facets of a more complex battle plan. This is because the Asiatic Fleet could not afford to exercise tactical options after the commencement of hostilities. It was reduced to reacting to Japanese initiatives and trying to execute a less than organized withdrawal to safer waters. Consequently, there was no overall battle plan for this story to follow.

Part I, Operations, provides a thumbnail sketch of the fleet, the tactical environment, the numerous commanders and pretenders to command, the allied forces in the theater, and a brief description of the performance of each component by ship type and air units. Part II, Battle Reports, is a collection of sixteen separate stories which detail heroism and adventure unparalleled by fiction.

The most salient quality of this book is its relevance to today's situation in the Western Pacific. The number of parallels is so remarkable it is alarming. The overage and overcommitted Asiatic Fleet operated in waters now patrolled by the Seventh Fleet. While the average

age of Seventh Fleet ships today is considerably less than that of Admiral Hart's ships in 1941, today's technology brings on obsolescence more rapidly. The expansion of Seventh Fleet operations to include a continuing presence in the Indian Ocean since late 1979 has left current assets stretched to near the limit of material and logistic endurance. Recognizing the additional commitments which would befall the Asiatic Fleet if the world situation continued to deteriorate Admiral Richardson, Commander-in-Chief, US Fleet in 1940, scheduled a substantial reinforcement including an aircraft carrier, three cruisers, and numerous lesser vessels. By May of 1941, however, the reinforcement was reduced to the addition of twenty-three fleet submarines. Today the need to reconstitute our naval strength is well recognized. The shipbuilding program being championed by Secretary Lehman will go a long way to ease the burden of the Seventh Fleet—if this ambitious program can be completed.

The problems of the Asiatic Fleet went far beyond having too few ships and their struggle to maintain an acceptable material condition. The command and control organization was inadequate for the rigors of war. The surface combatants were under a task force commander who was unable to amass a force in one place adequate to confront the enemy, the submarines were directed from the fleet commander's headquarters, and the patrol squadrons were separately controlled by their own unit commander. To make matters worse, if they were to understand what other friendly units were doing these subordinate commanders had to illegally copy and decode each other's message traffic. After the opening of hostilities, reorganization of the fleet and attempts at

integration with allied forces generated much confusion concerning who was in command of the various fleet units. The same ships were assigned concurrently to the command of more than one admiral, leading to enormous problems. Additionally, the staffs were not prepared to coordinate the efforts of widely separate units. Information was obtained but not passed to ships in need of it. Orders were prepared but not transmitted until after they were to have been executed.

There are many lessons here which are still unlearned. Today, aircraft carriers and surface combatants in the Seventh Fleet are assigned to the operational command of the Battle Force Commander, CTF 70. The surface combatants are concurrently administratively assigned to CTF 75, Commander Surface Combatant Force, who assumes operational command when the ships are not tasked to a carrier battle group. These transitions are clear and unambiguous in most cases. Submarines remain under the operational control of Commander Submarine Force, CTF 74, with the fleet commander's headquarters. Patrol aircraft tasking is coordinated through the Patrol Wing Commander, CTF 72. Additionally, logistics force requirements are controlled through the Service Force Commander, CTF 73, and amphibious forces through their own commander, CTF 76. Each of these separate operational forces has its own very heavy load of message traffic. The originator of any message must consciously decide to address his traffic to other commanders or they will be unaware of his intentions.

The Asiatic Fleet's patrol squadrons of PBY Catalinas were plagued by slow speed and inadequate defense against fighter aircraft. Likewise our current

P-3 Orion aircraft, though formidable adversaries for submarines and surface ships, are completely vulnerable to other aircraft.

In July of 1941 the Japanese moved into French Indochina and established naval bases at Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), Tourane (now Da Nang), and Camranh Bay. This allowed them to maintain and support forces which could strike without warning at any point in or around the South China Sea, including Singapore and Manila (where the Asiatic Fleet was based). Today, the major operating base and repair facility for the Seventh Fleet is at Subic Bay, less than 100 miles from Manila. Here, perhaps the lessons of history have not been ignored. Unfortunately, however, we were not the student. The Soviets are currently operating surface ships, submarines, and land based naval aircraft from Vietnamese bases enjoying all the same advantages once held by the Japanese.

Captain Winslow's work is more than an accurate and important assessment of what went wrong in the Asiatic Fleet. The Battle Reports section includes exciting accounts of desperate operations, personal sacrifice, and thrilling escapes. The evacuation of General MacArthur from the Philippines in Lieutenant (later Rear Admiral) John Bulkeley's PT boats is well known but the less noted escape of Lieutenant Commander (later Rear Admiral) John Morrill with sixteen of his men after the fall of Corregidor is an epic adventure. The much discussed mission of the *Lanikai* has portrayed President Roosevelt trying to find an excuse to declare war. The mission was actually carried out by the armed yacht *Isabel* under Lieutenant J. W. Payne. The story of this hapless little vessel extends long after her surveillance mission and includes the confirmed sinking of a Japanese submarine using

only resourcefulness and a makeshift depth charge rack.

The Fleet the Gods Forgot weaves these many stories into an enlightening account of the operations and accomplishments of the units of the Asiatic Fleet, a fleet which, though it vanished in the opening moments of combat in the Southwest Pacific has been succeeded by today's Seventh Fleet.

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Prange, Gordon W. *Miracle at Midway*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982. 469pp. \$19.95

There is a necessary "history" to this history. The late Gordon Prange (1910-1980), professor of history at the University of Maryland, reportedly devoted some thirty years of research to the subject of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and its related subjects. In 1969 part of his researches were published as "Tora! Tora! Tora!," a series in the *Reader's Digest*; in somewhat revised form this was published as a book in Japan but not in the United States; and in 1970 it formed the basis of a movie of the same title.

After Prange's death his former students Goldstein and Dillon, acting as his "literary executors," published *At Dawn We Slept; The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor*. This book would have been a sensation in 1951 but by 1981 there was little in it which remained "untold."

The current *Miracle At Midway* is a nominal sequel to the basic *At Dawn We Slept*, and reportedly the first of a series of sequels to be mined from Prange's research files and a collection of uncompleted typescripts. Toward this end, Prange Enterprises, Inc., had been created to exploit these materials.

Those who have read *At Dawn We Slept* and expect a product of similar quality in *Miracle At Midway* will be progressively disappointed, perplexed, angered, and ultimately disgusted by this miserable potboiler. It is impossible to believe that the two books were written by the same person. Whereas the former is a carefully structured and soberly written history of the Pearl Harbor drama, the latter is in a word: dreadful.

It should be enough to point out that at its outset this book fails to establish with any clarity the US Navy's perception of the Japanese threat to Midway as it was gradually pieced together by radio intercepts and cryptanalysis. This is related in marvelous detail in W.J. Holmes' *Double Edged Secrets: US Naval Intelligence Operations In The Pacific During World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1979), and this is a title which does not appear among the Prange book's references.

With this vital point badly bungled, the text blunders forth to the battle, dragging the reader through a maze of minor errors, major omissions, outrageous demonstrations of ignorance about the characteristics of ships, airplanes and the maritime environment as a whole, all of which is planted in a quagmire of mangled rhetoric.

In sum: this is a badly cobbled attempt to make sense out of a very complex naval operation. The text is badly organized, jerky, disjointed, and otherwise badly written. It is filled with clumsy solecisms and ridiculous figures of speech which quickly become irksome; the authors do not know how to permit facts to speak for themselves and hyperbolic rhetoric is repeatedly used to create drum rolls followed by a clash of cymbals; and the text is badly flawed by frequent use of "cute" slangy expressions which are reminiscent of an