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The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy

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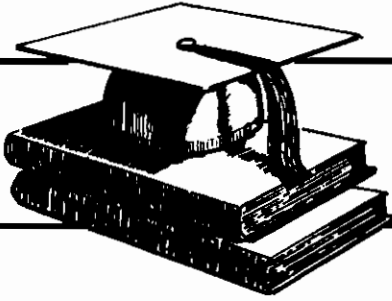
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PROFESSIONAL READING

BOOK REVIEWS

Agawa, Hiroyuki. *The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy*. John Bester, transl. Tokyo and N.Y.: Kodansha International, 1979. 397pp.

This book draws a fascinating portrait of a major figure in the history of the Imperial Japanese Navy and of World War II. Yamamoto Isoroku, as a naval cadet, fought during the Russo-Japanese War. During the interwar years he climbed the administrative ladder, serving as arms limitation negotiator, head of the aeronautics department of the Navy Ministry, and as its vice minister. Assuming command of the combined fleet in September 1939, he directed Japanese naval operations until his death in April 1943. His career and character attracted the author, a former naval officer and novelist whose works have won prizes from the Emperor and from the Japan Academy. Although he first published the book more than a decade ago, this translation provides new information and fresh insights of great value to the English-language reader.

The book can be read on three different levels, each of which should interest the military professional. As biography it etches a many-sided portrait of this tiny (five feet three inches, one hundred twenty five pounds) admiral. Agawa skillfully probes episodes in Yamamoto's public and personal lives to draw out hidden truths about the man who committed

the Imperial Japanese Navy to the attack on Pear Harbor. Contrasting opposites, he shows that what appeared on the surface was far from the whole truth about Yamamoto. The admiral, although fluent in English and many times a visitor and resident in the United States, never developed close friendships with Americans. Did he, then, really understand them? Yamamoto the champion of naval aviation nonetheless clung to stereotypical visions of a massive fleet engagement—a Jutland with airpower and a war-ending decision. Is it so surprising, then, that he blundered into Midway? Yamamoto the determined bureaucrat and thoughtful tactician remained forever a gambler and nonconformist, so much so that a fellow officer labeled him "a kind of navy hoodlum." The great commander of the fleet during the struggle for Guadalcanal, it would appear, remained intellectually immobilized by his passion for his geisha mistress and brooding about the ultimate outcome of the war.

The book is valuable in a second sense for the insights it offers into the workings of the Imperial Japanese Navy as an institution. Agawa does not provide a full organizational history but instead uses detail to show how the navy was at once extraordinarily international in outlook and simultaneously strikingly parochial. He offers information about education,

ceremony, and shipboard life that demonstrates how very Western in form the Japanese Navy was. Yet he also uses Yamamoto's personal correspondence and vignettes about operations planning and command relationships that reveal how that navy differed from its non-Japanese counterparts. Agawa argues that frequent contact with the world outside Japan made Yamamoto and other senior officers strong opponents of more nationalistic, army-backed policies that risked and ultimately provoked war with the United States. Yet the careful reader will find in these pages data that support the opposite interpretation developed by Stephen Pelz in *Race to Pearl Harbor*. Nowhere else in a Western language, however, can one find more information on the organizational behavior of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

On a third level this book can be read as a case study in civil-military relations. From 1939 onward, Yamamoto confronted the military professional's classic dilemma: what to do when one's government follows "wrong" policies? Although the admiral toyed with the idea of resignation, he never resigned. He warned his prime minister against the dangers of war with the United States at the same time as he pushed plans for what became the Pearl Harbor attack. By late 1941 he was determined to "pursue unswervingly a course that is precisely opposite to my personal views." How could he do so? Agawa hints that the admiral may have fallen into the "effectiveness trap," believing that quick victories might somehow educate the Japanese Government to the need to negotiate an end to what should have been seen as a limited war against the United States. He also hints that the Emperor-centered value system of officers of Yamamoto's generation may have precluded effective opposition to war. His most valuable contribution, however, is detail that

suggests that Yamamoto slipped into what psychologists call "cognitive dissonance." The admiral coped with his failure to influence national policy and his awareness of the probable end results of war with the United States by concentrating narrowly on plans for Pearl Harbor. Successful battle against those within the navy who questioned both the strategic soundness and technical feasibility of a strike there compensated for losses elsewhere. This kind of psychological displacement enabled Yamamoto to do what in retrospect seems unthinkable: launch a war that he was certain could not be won.

Two flaws lessen the value of this excellent translation for the non-Japanese reader. It lacks maps, leaving the reader puzzled about the location of places in Japan and in the South Pacific described so minutely by the author. Secondly, someone omitted source notes from this English text. Their absence renders the book less valuable to those who would want to compare this Japanese-based account of war and diplomacy with others written from American and British sources. Nonetheless, *Reluctant Admiral* commands the attention of anyone interested in the naval profession, the Imperial Japanese Navy, or the Pacific aspects of World War II.

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Albion, Robert Greenhalgh. *Makers of Naval Policy 1798-1947*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1980. 737pp.

Professor Albion's study of policymaking in the U.S. Navy was begun in 1948 and completed in 1950. The rough manuscript of this study, deposited in the Harvard College Library, in microfilm at the Naval War College and elsewhere, has been known to serious scholars for many years, but it is now published for the first time. The manuscript has had enormous