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Neglected Skies: The Demise of British Naval Power in the Far East, 1922–42

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Angus Britts

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The author uses these scenarios to demonstrate how a U.S. maritime response to regional aggression could be constrained or limited by diminished Navy and Marine Corps force structures and postures. Thus, these scenarios examine the potential vulnerabilities that have resulted from seablindness.

Cropsey recommends that the Trump administration conduct a comprehensive assessment of American sea power to determine the “goals, size, and character” of the U.S. Navy. In two chapters entitled “Rebuilding American Seapower” and “Naval Rearmament,” Cropsey’s analysis frames the naval force structure alternatives facing the Trump administration, Congress, and naval force planners. The author evaluates President Trump’s 2016 350-ship campaign goal by comparing it with the Navy’s 2017 thirty-year shipbuilding plan of 308 ships and the 2015 Congressional Budget Office assessment of Navy shipbuilding. Cropsey makes recommendations for changes in force posture, naval operating concepts, and force structure programming. He determines that the United States has the industrial capability and resources to build a 350-ship Navy—if the Trump administration effectively advocates for sea power, and if Congress establishes sea power as a priority.

Seablindness delivers a candid and uniquely comprehensive examination of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps by first assessing the past and current uses of American sea power and analyzing force-structure requirements, then considering the future security environment, naval missions in general, and particular employment options for the U.S. Navy.

SEAN SULLIVAN


Although the author describes his work as a “reconsideration” of the April 1942 clash between the British Eastern Fleet and the Imperial Japanese Navy’s Kido Butai (1st Mobile Force), this is probably something of a stretch. Britts’s main conclusion—that the neglect of naval aviation during the interwar years resulted in a Royal Navy that was uncompetitive when matched against the combat-seasoned and well-drilled multicarrier task force fielded by Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo— is hardly earth-shattering. Nor indeed are his explanations for this lapse: the obsolescence of both platforms and thinking in the Royal Navy; and the almost criminal squandering of a comprehensive early lead in naval aviation, a degradation brought about by parochial infighting within Whitehall, set against the chronic underfunding of the navy in particular. To my mind, to be considered a true reconsideration a work would have to offer significant new perspectives, new evidence, or a novel interpretation of an established set of events. Unfortunately, and notwithstanding a few fanciful counterfactuals, Britts does none of these things.

For a start, while the author in his second and third chapters conducts a thorough scrutiny of the policy-making rationale employed and the pitfalls of that approach, he does not back it up with a detailed analysis of the detrimental impact the “dual control” system had on comprehensive development of naval aviation as a warfare discipline.
The excessive compartmentalization and “stovepiping” always were destined to create difficulties, but in an era when the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force were fighting one another for their very existences, the necessary motivation to come together was lacking altogether. As a result, the research and development necessary to produce aircraft optimized for warfare at sea never achieved sufficient priority within a Royal Air Force primarily dedicated to offensive bombardment over land. Even more damaging, the low status of naval pilots within the service (a point that Britts does mention) meant that the development of the aerial tactics necessary to use the air weapon efficiently as an element of sea warfare suffered accordingly.

Similarly, the book almost totally overlooks the reasons why the Japanese outclassed everyone (the U.S. Navy included) when it came to the operation of multiship carrier groups in 1941, even though there has been some excellent scholarship on this subject during the last couple of decades, most notably from Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully in their book *Shattered Sword* (Potomac Books, 2005). After all, it was not a matter merely of the technical competence of the Japanese A6M Zekes and B5N Kates, as impressive as these aircraft were. The impact of the planes was magnified by the techniques the Japanese had developed for operating multiple air wings at sea and massing their effects. Unlike other navies—whose carriers still operated as individuals, launching small groups of aircraft of all disciplines in discrete packages—the Japanese alone had mastered the art of role-specializing decks. Carriers within the group coordinated their launches, such that half contributed dive-bombers to complement the torpedo/level bombers of the other half, thus producing a large, coordinated force of aircraft in each wave, while greatly simplifying the second-strike options (with each carrier’s contribution simply being reversed).

Chapter 5 therefore could have been enhanced greatly by references to more-contemporary scholarship in this area. So, with no new exploration of the operational imbalance between the two sides, the only real “reconsideration” on offer is the actual significance (to Great Britain and its dominions) of Admiral James Somerville’s decision on April 9, 1942, to preserve his fleet for another day. While certainly humiliating, this again was hardly the epoch-making event that is suggested. The Royal Navy, in company with many others, both before and after, arguably simply was adjusting to the changing realities of combat experience, as compared with prewar expectations. It had happened earlier, during World War I and off Norway in 1940, and it was going to happen to the U.S. Navy off Guadalcanal a few months later. As for the impact that this had on the perceived vulnerabilities of Australia and India, this is probably something that is understated in the other Western accounts and Britts, as an Australian, is in the right place to redress this balance. Whether the Japanese could have followed through in 1942 is almost immaterial; the perceptions were probably there.

Finally, although obviously not as importantly, the book has its fair share of questionable statements, exaggerations, and even spelling errors, none of which help its credibility. Perhaps most notable are the inaccuracies, which include the alleged “unabated”
construction of Japanese cruisers throughout the 1930s (p. 107), when in fact cruiser construction stopped after the completion of the Takao class in 1932 and did not resume until 1937. The “decks filled with aircraft” at Midway (p. 156) is an assertion Parshall proved false long ago, while the idea of the “F6F and TBF being near twins” (p. 163) makes no sense, given their completely different roles and specifications. The exaggerations—such as that Somerville’s fleet would “not [have been] out of place at Tsushima” (p. 16), and the reference to “octogenarian” aircraft (p. 47), when aviation itself was barely thirty-five years old—are just unnecessary.

To summarize, this book probably will disappoint serious historians and researchers, but nevertheless it does gather together a host of useful thoughts about the problems of block obsolescence and the integration of new capabilities within a fleet in peacetime. Given that these points may stimulate future work or serve to educate the amateur enthusiast, all is not lost. But the book could have been so much more.

ANGUS ROSS


The use of proxies as a part of the competition and conflict between states is an ancient and time-tested method. Yet from the mercenaries of the pharaoh’s army in ancient Egypt to private military and security companies accompanying militaries in modern conflict, each relationship between a state and its proxies is unique and is driven by a multitude of factors. In this timely and well-researched book, Tim Maurer examines how modern states use cyber proxies to pursue their geopolitical aims.

The introduction of Maurer’s book is a deep dive into the evolution of the use of cyber proxies by states. Unlike many authors of popular books examining the use of cyber operations, Maurer feels no need to sensationalize the cyber realm. Instead, we get a realistic and accurate assessment of the capabilities of cyber proxies. If there is a weakness to his introduction, it is that he focuses on traditional “hacking,” or denial-of-service cyber operations. Although this approach is quite understandable and is representative of most scholarly work on cyber, recent trends suggest a greater use of algorithmic exploitation to conduct information-operation campaigns. These campaigns are unique in that they do not appear to break any laws, domestic or international.

Following the introduction, Maurer proceeds to provide a logical, analytical framework for categorizing cyber proxies and how states use them. This is no small task, given the variety of roles and relationships these groups have vis-à-vis their respective state organizations. Maurer organizes the various modes of proxy use into three main categories: delegation, orchestration, and sanctioning. Delegation is the proxy relationship in which the state exerts the greatest degree of control over its proxy. An example is the relationship between the U.S. Defense Department and a contractor providing a cyber capability. In orchestration, the state may provide limited logistical support or general guidance to the proxy, but stops short of issuing specific instructions. This relationship