

Review Essay

The Battle of Midway

John Francis

“There has been much written about the Battle of Midway and in many respects there has been a startling lack of accuracy.”⁽¹⁾

This comment dates from 1946 prior to the immediate post-Second World War investigations into various aspects of the Pacific War and the official histories produced in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It was an accurate appreciation made, not by one of the investigators or historians, but by a participant, Stanhope Ring, commander of one of the USN’s three carrier air groups in the battle. Ring was also prescient. Much has since been written on Midway, but accurate accounts are still difficult to find.

Early published works were brief, based on uncorroborated, often conflicting recollections and built on the story of American triumph “against the odds” that had been reported in the news at the time. The requirements of military security limited the release of information, and this was particularly true concerning the extent of code-breaking work by the USN’s radio intercept units, especially station “Hypo” at Pearl Harbor. Even after the war, it took a long time for details of the intelligence story to be revealed and later studies have shown that the initial published versions lacked much in accuracy. It is clear that these early accounts were heavily influenced by some of the central characters on both sides who, by then, had risen to high rank and in some cases had an opportunity to shape the official record. Japanese accounts were also influenced by a desire to remain on friendly terms with the victors of the conflict, who by then were the occupying power in the Japanese homeland.

It was a long while before a truer picture of events emerged. Strangely, it appears that a major catalyst was Hollywood’s film *Midway* (1976). This dramatization led many of the survivors to declare “it wasn’t like that,” which in turn prompted various studies as new evidence became available, particularly translated Japanese reports, especially *Senshi Soshō*,⁽²⁾ Japan’s multi-volume official war history.

The purpose of this review article is to examine some of the additional information that has come to light and changing interpretations by looking at four of the many recent works about the battle of Midway. One of these is by a then-junior enlisted sailor on one of the aircraft carriers, who later become an academic at Yale and Princeton Universities, while the two others are by professional historians from both sides of the

Atlantic. It then moves on to examine the latest work by Prof. Dallas Woodbury Isom, *The Battle of Midway— Why the Japanese Lost* (2007).

Background

The starting point for most studies is the 1948 Report⁽³⁾ by a committee set up in 1946 by Admiral Raymond Spruance who was then as president of the US Naval War College, and chaired by Admiral Richard Bates. Spruance is better known to many as the victor of Midway — even though he was not in overall command. There was considerable disquiet at the time about Bates' methods of investigation, and then with some of his more fanciful conclusions, notably from Spruance himself, who asked for part of it to be revised. The report does contain a number of "battle lessons," the danger of which is being wise after the event rather than endeavouring to understand how and why events unfolded as they did. It was also highly critical of some of the American commanders and, therefore, provoked considerable opposition.

Still, the Bates report lauded the excellence of American strategy and battle performance, while focusing on Japanese shortcomings. At this same time, Professor Samuel Eliot Morison was preparing the Pacific theatre parts of his mammoth, 15-volume *History of US Naval Operations in World War II*.⁽⁴⁾ Morison had privileged access to official records, and his detailed account of Midway mainly celebrated American achievements. It is easy to see how the propaganda news reports at the time of the battle grew into "the brilliant American victory against all odds" of the 1950s. When the official British naval historian, Captain Stephen Roskill, produced *The War at Sea 1939-1945*, published in 1954 to 1961, he acknowledged his indebtedness to Morison thus giving further credibility to that account.

These "official versions" relied heavily on two personal testimonies. One was by Ensign George Gay, who was shot down in one of the early torpedo bomber attacks and maintained that he witnessed the entire battle by hiding below his floating life-raft. The other was by ⁽⁵⁾ by Captain Mitsuo Fuchida. As the Imperial Japanese Army (IJN) First Air Fleet's air commander, Fuchida had led the Pearl Harbor attack and was also present at Midway, though unable to fly due to appendicitis. What better corroboration could there be but the words of a former enemy? Unfortunately, Fuchida was to become deeply discredited by what some saw as impaired memory and others, as downright falsehoods. His book is now regarded as a "nonsense work" designed to protect reputations. Produced in collaboration with Masatake Okimiya, the book also suffered by being edited as well as translated by two eminent American historians, Roger Pineau and Clark Kawakami, who felt a need to correct what they perceived as some errors.

So we come to Walter Lord's tendentious title, *Midway — Incredible Victory* (1967).⁽⁶⁾ This produced what Professor Isom has described as "the standard American scenario of the battle" (see also later). IJN Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto was determined to defeat the USN in a "decisive battle," of the type envisaged by Alfred Thayer Mahan,⁽⁷⁾ and he believed that an attack on Midway would draw the USN into his ambush. The USN knew all about his plan as it had cracked the IJN's codes and Admiral Chester Nimitz, the commander-in-chief Pacific at Pearl Harbor, set up his own ambush with the

heavily outnumbered remnants of his fleet. The IJN air and submarine reconnaissance plans fell apart; the commander of the First Air Fleet, Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, attacked Midway Island with half his force but then indecision forced on him by inadequate search reports led him to twice re-arm his attack planes. American air attacks drew the Mitsubishi Zero fighters forming the combat air patrol over the Japanese carriers down to sea level to wreak tremendous havoc among the obsolescent Douglas TBD Devastator torpedo bombers; but the day was saved because the failed torpedo bomber attacks cleared the way for the Douglas Dauntless dive bombers (who only found the Japanese carriers by a fluke) to bomb them just at the very moment their decks were crowded with loaded attack planes and unused ordnance. The USN aircraft were able to sink three of the four Japanese carriers, aircraft from the last of which had sunk USS *Yorktown* but was then in turn sunk by a strike from the two surviving USN carriers.

It was the very stuff Hollywood loves (provided it can tell the story its own way) and it certainly did this with *Midway* (1976) starring Charlton Heston, Glen Ford and Henry Fonda. Taking away the love interest sub-plot of the film, we are left with the by-now familiar characterization of the battle as an “incredible victory.” But were the Americans outnumbered? What were the Zeroes doing? Was Admiral Nagumo indecisive? Were the Japanese decks crowded with planes and loose bombs? Why was the Japanese plan so complicated and above all else, whose fault was it? In short, was it an “incredible victory” or was the USN just plain lucky?

In many respects, the film pushed the pendulum too far. When Gordon Prange’s book, *Miracle at Midway*,⁽⁸⁾ appeared in 1982, he joined the list of various authorities questioning this version of events. The British naval historian Peter C. Smith aired similar views in 1977 (without the dramatic title). His research has continued since then and the most recent version will be considered later in this article.

Some of the hardest questioning of the standard American scenario arose as a result of various works on other related aspects of the Pacific War, notably Rear Admiral Edwin Layton’s “*And I was there*” *Pearl Harbor and Midway—Breaking the Secrets*⁽⁹⁾ on the activities of Pearl Harbor’s Station “Hypo” code-breaking and combat intelligence unit, and John Lundstrom’s *The First Team: Pacific Air Combat from Pearl Harbor to Midway*⁽¹⁰⁾ dealing with the air battles in the early stages of the Pacific War. In addition, an increasing amount of material from Japan was being translated and circulated in America and much of this contradicted Fuchida’s assertions. Midway became one of the first battles to be discussed on the Internet and, while some of the views expressed were bizarre, it did lead to the establishment of the Battle of Midway Round Table as an Internet discussion forum and the creation of various Midway websites.

Recent Titles

This, then, is the context for the four recent works considered here.

Shattered Sword : The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway. Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully (2005). Potomac Books, Dulles, VA; ISBN 1-57488-923-0.

Parshall and Tully’s book sets out to put the record straight by telling the

Japanese side of the story, concentrating particularly on the four carriers of the First Air Fleet, the *Kido Butai*. The two authors were consultants to a 1999 expedition to the Battle of Midway site. They were not naval officers but rather naval historians with a longstanding interest in the topic. Their book tells the story in 24 chapters totalling 443 pages which break down into three parts; the preparations, the attacks and an analysis of various aspects of the battle. It includes 11 extremely detailed appendices, detailed endnotes, maps and ship plans (mostly by Parshall himself) and nearly 100 photographs, many of which have not appeared before. Their research was meticulous and involved interviews with survivors as well as examination of IJN records, although, of course, without the logs of the four lost carriers. Two examples will have to suffice. First is their analysis of the time needed to re-arm the Nakajima B5N2 Type 97 “Kate” attack planes from air-launched torpedoes to 800 kg high explosive bombs and back again, and the shorter time needed for the Aichi D3A1 Type 99 “Val” dive bomber, which had only to change armour-piercing to high explosive 242kg and 250kg bombs. In this analysis the authors consider the availability of the ordnance carts to move the weapons from storage racks in magazines to the planes and even the differing elevator speeds on the various older and newer carriers, all of which affected the time needed to spot and launch a strike. One cannot help but be impressed at this in-depth research rather than adopting the previous approach of “well the Americans did it this way so the Japanese must have done the same.” The second example is their detailed analysis of the search pattern flown by the First Air Fleet on the morning of the attack using the float planes of the supporting battleships and cruisers, which contradicts the previously held view that it was the late take off of *Tone’s* no. 4 float plane that caused the problems. Parshall and Tully conclude that if it had taken off on time, it would not have found the USN as early as it did. Their work also contains an excellent analysis of the damage done to the four carriers and how and why the fires spread so extensively throughout the ships.

But Parshall and Tully’s work, exhaustive as it is, is not without its critics. In a review for the present publication Commander Ken Hansen remarked that although the authors produced an excellent battle diary with “good research and highly integrated logic,” other parts of their book failed to cover the issues of command relationships between the IJN General Staff, Combined Fleet HQ and the First Air Fleet and also the factional rivalries between their commanders, particularly between Yamamoto and Nagumo. This produced what he describes as a “bottom-up analysis” due to concentration on tactical and technical issues without an understanding of strategy and operations. This is strong stuff but he has pointed it out in correspondence that it is backed up by an ongoing dialogue in the *Naval War College Review* with Professor Dallas Isom.

Other reviewers have been much less critical and it is interesting to note that Jonathan Parshall also provided much of the illustrative material and consultative support for two earlier works which have done much to improve our understanding of the IJN. These are *Kaigun* (1997)⁽¹¹⁾ by David Evans and Mark Peattie and *Sunburst* (2001)⁽¹²⁾ by Mark Peattie, so he is not a newcomer to this field.

While not every reader will agree with Parshall and Tully, their book is a major

contribution to our knowledge because it overturns many of the established views of the battle. Although it has been attacked by other authorities with alternative points of view, this should not affect our appreciation of their extensive research, the way they have presented their conclusions, and the fact that they accept that other authorities may reach different conclusions.

Midway — Dauntless Victory: Fresh Perspectives on America's seminal naval victory of WWII. Peter C. Smith (2007). Pen & Sword, S. Yorkshire, UK; ISBN 978 1 84415 5835.

This article has already referred to Peter C. Smith's original work on the Battle of Midway in 1977, shortly after the Hollywood epic was released. Smith has now pitched into the post-Parshall and Tully debate with his own "fresh thoughts." Like Parshall and Tully's book, it is a lengthy analysis spread over 329 pages and divided into four parts; Build-up, The battle commences, Duel to the Death and The Midway legacy, accompanied by two appendices, a select bibliography, and glossary and index together with nearly 100 illustrations (many of them unseen before), maps, diagrams and tables, extensive acknowledgements and an author's note. Again, this work has also been reviewed in this journal, by Michael Young of Ottawa, Canada.

Unlike Parshall and Tully, Smith does not limit himself to the Japanese side of the battle and is very critical of some of the commanders and command decisions made by both sides. He is careful to point out that, in many respects, it was a battle fought by some very junior sailors and airmen, many of whom lost their lives due to poor decisions made higher up the chain of command. Nor have the participants always received the credit they deserved, particularly the dive bomber crews. This is a favourite subject of Smith's and one he has written about widely. Again he has used and compared survivors' reports and interviews from both sides as well as other research that has become available since he first wrote about the topic in 1977. Many of his "fresh thoughts," however, are almost "lengthy asides."

The book has been extensively criticised for the publisher's layout (not necessarily Smith's fault), which is two closely-typed columns per page with very extensive footnotes rather than endnotes. While locating footnotes on the relevant page is often a useful quick reference, in this case it fails because the author has mixed into them brief biographies of all the characters mentioned including some who were hardly involved at all. This has the effect of overwhelming the main text (e.g. pages 46-47 where 42 lines of double-column text sit above 186 closely-typed lines in a smaller font set in double-columns of notes). These biographies would have been better placed in another appendix. Other books on the topic have placed much of the detailed information (e.g. on ship damage, aircrew names, etc.) in separate appendices. This helps the main text to flow in a way that Smith's does not always do, and may well have been a contributing factor to the large number of unfortunate typographical errors in the book. Additionally, the many references to British carriers and aircraft do not fit comfortably in the story. While Smith has very wide knowledge of this topic and there is much interesting information here, it is a pity to introduce it in this way. He feels that "being British he can sometimes look objectively at events or incidents that are still highly

charged and subject to intense partisan feelings” (author’s note) but it is clear that not all reviewers are happy with a “limey” writing about America’s seminal naval battle of the Second World War or are as charitable as Michael Young. Some of them are very critical of what they see as his “abrasive” style.

Nevertheless, Smith makes some very perceptive observations (e.g. “there was no shortage of expertise on USS *Hornet* on that morning. What there was, however, was a total lack of combat experience coupled with a distinct lack of harmony” (p.73). Smith makes more of this in his “Post War Conclusions” when he mentions John Lundstrom’s *Black Shoe Admiral*⁽¹³⁾ which, in a somewhat biased biography of Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, points out the “remarkably effective performance” of USS *Yorktown* on the morning of 4 June compared with Mitscher’s USS *Hornet*. Perhaps we should also consider the performance of USS *Enterprise*, the third US carrier and Spruance’s flagship, led by the irascible Captain Miles Browning?

Midway — Dauntless Victory remains an outstanding contribution to our understanding of the battle and the characters involved, but make no mistake, it is not a short read, even if it were possible to concentrate on it full-time.

The Unknown Battle of Midway — The destruction of the American Torpedo Squadrons. Alvin Kernan (2005). Yale University Press, New Haven, CT; ISBN 0-300-109890X.

The third book being examined is completely different in concept and sets out to tell a very limited part of the Midway story, the almost total destruction of the three Douglas Devastator TBD squadrons embarked on the three USN carriers in an act of needless sacrifice.

Alvin Kernan was a young, enlisted ordnanceman aboard USS *Enterprise* at the time of the battle and served later as aircrew in the USN until 1945. He felt compelled to write what has been described as “a troubling but persuasive analysis” of various aspects of a battle that saw 44 out of 51 of the torpedo bombers fail to return with a loss of 97 of the 126 aircrew and yet not a single torpedo hit its target. He reveals the failures that were omitted from official reports, the planes that ran out of fuel because the range calculations were wrong, the official cover-up about the USN’s air-launched torpedoes, the lack of training and the breakdown of the attack plan. He also reveals the tense situation on board Captain Marc Mitscher’s USS *Hornet* in the aftermath of the battle, particularly with criticism of the air group commander, Stanhope Ring by some of the aircrews. It is clear that some of the commanders were very lucky to come out of the battle with enhanced reputations, whilst others did not come out of it at all.

This book tells its part of the story in 144 pages and eight chapters. There are four detailed appendices, endnotes, biographies and a brief index which also cross-references the photographs.

While this book does not have the wide-ranging view of the two other works, it makes an important contribution to our knowledge of the battle and it is fittingly dedicated to the memory of Lieutenant Commander John Waldron, the commanding officer of Torpedo 8 from USS *Hornet*, who found his way unerringly to the Japanese

carriers when many of the other squadrons did not, and who led his crews and planes to their almost total destruction. The only survivor was Ensign George Gay.

Midway Inquest — Why the Japanese lost the Battle of Midway. Dallas Woodbury Isom (2007). Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN; ISBN 978-0-253-34904-0.

This review article has already referred to Professor Isom's "spirited debate" with Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully about their book. Isom has produced various articles about the topic, so it is no surprise to see that he has produced his own analysis of why the Japanese lost the battle, though this should not be confused with the Japanese side of the battle. The theme of his book is to develop "a more plausible scenario" than the "standard American one" and there is a very clear statement of intent at the beginning.

The resultant book in its 10 chapters in 293 pages plus some unusual appendices is much more than a statement of reasons why the Japanese lost, it is another analysis of the entire battle. It includes the lead-up to it, the launch of the attack on Midway itself and what Isom calls the fateful decision "to launch or not to launch, which he sees as the key to why the Japanese lost. He makes the point that Nagumo had not suddenly become a totally incompetent commander and there were reasons, not only practical ones to do with the speed with which the aircraft handlers could cope with his orders and counter-orders, but also doctrinal ones to do with IJN organisation and tactics. As well, there was the Japanese version of the "black shoe, brown shoe" issue that also be-devilled the USN. This was the question of whether a non-aviator should be in charge of a carrier or carrier task force and it is interesting to compare the Japanese situation with Mitscher's and Spruance's relations. Isom makes some very interesting points about the wear and tear on the aircraft and aircrews during Nagumo's six months of running riot after Pearl Harbor in the South Pacific and Indian Ocean and the effects of the damage to *Shokaku* and also the losses among *Zuikaku's* air group at Coral Sea a month before. He looks critically at some of Parshall and Tully's ideas and, not unexpectedly, differs with them on the question of the search pattern. He agrees with them on Yamamoto's responsibility both for an over-elaborate master plan, with units too far apart for mutual support, and also the Aleutian Islands diversion, which saw two of his small carriers side-lined in a way that was the very opposite of Nimitz's deployment.

Isom makes no secret of the fact that he is a lawyer rather than a historian or naval officer, and states that he, therefore, applies a more stringent questioning of the evidence. In some respects, however, Smith's book offers a wider examination of the evidence, especially of survivors, though he does not always reach a conclusion. Herein lies one of the issues with Isom's book: because he is satisfied with the answer, he assumes the readers will also be. This is particularly evident in Chapter 9 — Aftermath. For example, on page 250 "my conjecture is a combination of the two ..." where the reasons for this conjecture are not fully explained. Nevertheless, the Aftermath section of the book, covering the skirmishes and four large battles in the Solomons around Guadalcanal later in 1942 is extremely useful. It puts flesh on the bones of the argument about whether Midway was a decisive battle because it turned the tide of the war, or whether it was what Churchill referred to in another context as being "not the beginning

of the end, but perhaps the end of the beginning.” With a ships-lost tally of one USN carrier and a single destroyer to the IJN’s four crack ships of Carrier Divisions 1 and 2 of the *Kido Butai* plus the disaster that befell *Mikuma* and *Mogami* on the last day of the battle, there was no doubt who the victors were. This was unlike the Battle of the Coral Sea one month earlier which had also seen Japan’s expansion halted, though with both sides claiming victory. Unfortunately, in a final chapter titled Postmortem, Isom produces a summary of what he sees as the key reason why the Japanese lost the battle, but then becomes involved in a series of ‘What Ifs,’ some of which are exceedingly fanciful.

Nevertheless, by taking a different approach with a different objective, Isom’s work adds to our understanding of the battle and its outcome.

Final thoughts

All four volumes considered here have broadened discussion of the battle in terms of factors to be considered, and interpretations of evidence. Much of the credit for opening up the debate must go to Parshall and Tully, although they were not the first to identify the issues. To some extent, they have provided a target for others to shoot at and there has been a lot of shooting.

There is no doubt that these books will not be the last contributions on the battle. Already the Battle of Midway Round Table has produced *No Right to Win – a continuing dialogue with veterans of the Battle of Midway* by Ronald Russell⁽¹⁴⁾ with the objective of allowing the few remaining survivors to share their recollections. We owe it to them not to forget the sacrifices their colleagues made, particularly the crews of Torpedo 3, 6 and 8.

We should also look, however, at the reputations of those who made their names during and soon after the battle and question whether testimony from those who lost their lives as opposed to those who survived, might not have forced us to see things differently.

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 14. Ronald Russell, *No right to win — a continuing dialogue with veterans of the Battle of Midway* (Battle of Midway Roundtable, 2006).



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