



2012-023

Douglas Ford, *The Elusive Enemy: U.S. Naval Intelligence and the Imperial Japanese Fleet*. Annapolis: Naval Inst. Press, 2011. Pp. xiv, 297. ISBN 978-0-306-81557-7.

Review by Hal M. Friedman, Henry Ford Community College (friedman@hfcc.edu).

The Elusive Enemy looks at how the US Navy's Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) analyzed the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) before and during the Pacific War (1941-45). In preparing the book, Douglas Ford (Univ. of Salford) has consulted a wide range of both primary and secondary sources.¹ He also seeks to improve on previous studies of US naval intelligence in the Pacific Theater of Operations by drawing on the now significant amount of declassified material on this neglected subject. Departing from earlier histories that focus on signals intelligence, doctrine, and technology, he understands intelligence in its broadest sense in explaining how and why ONI operated as it did. Ford argues that ONI changed its "strategic culture" in defining and collecting intelligence and used that intelligence to counter the strengths of the IJN while exploiting the enemy's weaknesses. In the process, he finds that racial bias was not a factor in ONI analyses because too little was known about that category of information.

The book traces ONI's transformation over the course of the long war—how it reacted to early defeats and how it later capitalized on the Pacific Fleet's combat experience, prisoner of war interrogations, and captured enemy documents and equipment in its analyses. ONI successfully adapted to wartime challenges it neither had nor could have foreseen in the interwar period. By contrast, Ford maintains, the Japanese never anticipated anything but a short war and were hamstrung by racial and cultural prejudices.

Ford shows convincingly that ONI's efforts against the Japanese in the period between the World Wars were frustrated by measures taken to keep the IJN's activities secret, especially the construction of new ships and planes. Compartmentalized Japanese operational plans, too, remained secure even after ONI succeeded in reading some Japanese naval radio communications in the late 1930s.² Even though it often observed IJN operations and methods, ONI in its reports emphasized Japan's limited operational capabilities and lack of advanced technologies and strategic sophistication. Might such ill-advised judgments have stemmed, at least partially, from racial preconceptions? Though Ford discovers no evidence of that in the primary sources, his *ex silentio* argument is brought into question by the general prevalence of racial bias in the period. Ford notes that ONI estimated unobserved IJN capabilities based on those of the US Navy. The study would have been strengthened by giving more attention to the drawbacks of such intelligence analysis methods.

Not surprisingly, Ford contends that interwar senior American naval officers as well as strategic and operational planners accepted wholesale ONI's assumptions about Japan's lack of resources and industrial potential, the geographic challenges it faced, and the IJN's inculcation of Mahanian precepts. American naval commanders believed Japan could not fight a long war or even mount more than one major operation at a time. They were also convinced that Japan would lose a war of attrition in the Pacific by relying too heavily on air power as American aircraft production ramped up. Ford astutely gives due credit to these officers, however, for realizing at the same time that a true assessment of Japan's naval capabilities could not be made before hostilities began. "Until the Americans had a direct encounter with the Japanese, authorities were not able to determine how efficiently their forces could cope with their adversary" (46). In other words, combat alone would be the ultimate test of ONI's analytical capability.

1. Esp. in the Library of Congress and the National Archives and in the Operational Archives of the Naval History and Heritage Command.

2. Ford should have looked more closely at the impact of the US ability to read Japanese radio communications because of signals breakthroughs during the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-22. I understand that he is not focused on signals intelligence in the present book, but so critically important an advance should have been mentioned.

Ford finds that, after Pearl Harbor, the Navy in general and, to some extent, even ONI changed their view of the IJN from that of “lesser foe” to “superior enemy.”³ Certainly, during this phase of the war, the after-action combat reports ONI relied on were full of “doom and gloom” accounts by combat personnel who had been blitzed by the IJN. Ford concentrates here on the dire problems that Japanese air power, in particular, posed for the US Navy.

As regards the IJN’s air arm, Ford observes that ONI in 1942 was overwhelmingly dependent on reports by combat personnel for information. Especially valuable is his demonstration that ONI also still lacked the personnel, resources, and organizational structure to analyze and improve Pacific Fleet operations. What useful changes there were in early wartime Pacific Fleet doctrine, tactics, and procedures came about because senior commanders benefitted from combat experience and after-action reports, not any information that ONI had to offer.

It is heartening to see substantial coverage devoted not only to carrier operations but to surface ship and submarine actions in 1942 as well, since surface ships were an important part of the Japanese naval order of battle and submarines were so key to the American naval order of battle. The book shows, too, that combat experience enabled ONI to disseminate more and better information to the Pacific Fleet. Submarine crews, for example, realized that the Japanese were neglecting to defend their merchant ships adequately, while surface crews in the Solomons learned that the IJN often lacked radar but excelled in night torpedo tactics. But the fast pace of operations and of turnover of commanders, as well as shortages of equipment and highly trained personnel, hampered the Navy’s struggle against the Japanese.

Ford argues that the Navy achieved something like parity in fighting the IJN in 1942, even if it could not yet take the offensive. This is debatable, given how short of cruisers, fast battleships, and fleet carriers the US Navy was by November of that year. Also, Ford stresses the Navy’s overconfidence that its radar technology would balance the odds, but does not give enough attention to the problems of poor leadership, deficient prewar training, and ineffective doctrine, tactics, and planning as causes of US defeats at this time.⁴

By the 1943–45 period, Ford writes, ONI had improved its organizational capabilities, for example, by increasing the number of trained linguists on its staff.⁵ The flow of useful information to the Pacific Fleet also improved as fleet personnel became more cognizant of the value of captured enemy equipment, documents, and personnel to ONI analysts. “Most important, the intelligence gained through encounters with enemy forces was used to draw lessons on how the Pacific Fleet could fight more successfully” (128).

Ford points out that wartime circumstances imposed certain limitations. Photographic intelligence, for instance, could reveal only so much about Japanese capabilities and still less about their intentions. The analysis of the Long-Lance Torpedo took longer than the Pacific Fleet thought necessary. IJN prisoners, some four thousand by 1944, were often uncooperative or simply uninformed. Consequently, ONI and the Pacific Fleet never had sufficiently detailed knowledge of Japanese aircraft or ships. In addition, figuring out Japanese doctrine and strategy continued to be a hit-and-miss proposition since doctrine manuals usually went down with ships and aircraft. Yet in this later period, Ford writes, most American naval officers, excepting Adm. William Halsey, were still reluctant to make cultural or racial judgments about the Japanese because of ONI’s insistence on what it considered credible evidence as opposed to guesswork, speculation, or intuition.

Ford rightly asserts that the Pearl Harbor attack made ONI and the Pacific Fleet overestimate IJN capabilities for virtually the rest of the war. Fearing that the Japanese were upgrading their equipment or devising new tactics, ONI and the Pacific Fleet, according to Ford, were determined to avoid overconfidence in the Navy’s capabilities vis-à-vis the IJN. While American successes in 1942 and early 1943 proved that the

3. This paralleled the change of opinion among Americans in general: the Japanese went from “sub-humans” to “supermen.” See John Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (NY: Pantheon, 1986).

4. See Trent Hone, “The Evolution of Fleet Tactical Doctrine in the U.S. Navy, 1922–1941,” *Journal of Military History* 67 (2003) 1107–48 and “U.S. Navy Surface Battle Doctrine and Victory in the Pacific,” *Naval War College Review* 62 (2009) 67–105.

5. Unfortunately, Ford does not cite Roger Dingman, *Deciphering the Rising Sun: Navy and Marine Corps Codebreakers, Translators, and Interpreters in the Pacific War* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2009).

Japanese Navy was not composed of supermen, there were still doubts that the IJN was on the ropes. Ford adduces here Adm. Raymond Spruance's conduct in the Battle of the Philippine Sea and Halsey's demeanor after the near disaster at Leyte Gulf.

The study would have been strengthened, however, by some analysis of why it took so long to restore confidence. Did the Navy continue to lack self-assurance after Midway, given the close calls of the carrier and surface battles in the Solomons in late 1942? Whatever the reason, Ford persuasively shows that even as US forces grew more and more powerful and came closer to Japan, while the IJN was increasingly debilitated by its losses, ONI and the Pacific Fleet never succumbed to complacency. This was wise, since the Japanese were still at times able to inflict serious damage on the US Navy.

In this context of continued caution, as throughout his book, Ford demonstrates how the synergy between operations and intelligence evolved over the course of the war: "Intelligence played a pivotal role in paving the way for the U.S. Navy's triumph over the IJN. While the possession of numerically superior forces with technologically advanced armaments was a key prerequisite, the proper deployment of resources was often of equal importance. The availability of good information facilitated the Pacific Fleet's effort to gauge the Japanese and thereafter develop the appropriate ways to combat them" (221).

Ford demonstrates, for example, that ONI and the Pacific Fleet had more and better intelligence about Japanese naval aviation if only because continual attacks by IJN's air arm gave more opportunities for observation and subsequent analysis by naval commanders and intelligence officers. However, ONI never pinned down exact figures for Japanese aircraft manufacturing. Even as observation and analysis made it clear that IJN air power was badly degraded by the time the Pacific Fleet was nearing Japan's Home Islands, US naval commanders never lowered their guard against their fading but still dangerous foe.

In addition, Ford points out continued gaps in intelligence analysis in the second half of the war. Although ONI eventually saw the advantage of working out intelligence-sharing agreements with the US Army Air Forces to ensure more effective analyses, timelier distribution of information, and better application of lessons learned. While ONI had by 1944 created a centralized technical air intelligence center, Ford notes that there continued to be problems in communicating with the Pacific Fleet. For example, naval commanders still struggled to ascertain more precisely Japanese capabilities, intentions, and doctrine; POWs seldom knew anything of high command decisions; doctrine manuals were of little use when specific units were being allowed to deviate from doctrine; and captured items of equipment were not always good indicators of production levels.

Surprisingly, the primary sources consulted for *The Elusive Enemy* attest to a consistent avoidance of cultural or racial judgments about the Japanese, even after the IJN began to deploy suicide planes late in the war. US naval commanders—unlike the rank and file—saw the kamikaze strikes simply as a logical deployment of a highly effective weapon. Considerations of insufficient raw materials, production problems, and personnel shortages were paramount, cultural predilections being only secondary.

ONI also collaborated with the Pacific Fleet in the effort to improve the air defense of US Navy vessels but, again, not without problems. By 1943–44, Naval Intelligence was better at analyzing and distributing information to the Fleet, but it still could not always keep up with changes in Japanese tactics and techniques. Pacific Fleet personnel, Ford writes, were dissatisfied with the state of anti-aircraft defenses and the information they had on IJN air assets. Part of this problem, however, was also operational. Radar, then in its infancy, could not always detect approaching Japanese aircraft, especially at low levels. In addition, gunnery exercises and practice were often forgone in favor of more critical operations such as maintenance, logistics, and combat itself. Gunnery crews were also often too sanguine about the fighter squadrons' ability to carry out all of the air defense tasks. Japanese nighttime air attacks were particularly problematic and never adequately dealt with before war's end.

Ford's discussion of fighter defense highlights another aspect of the US Navy's war in the Pacific. The Pacific Fleet acquired new equipment needed to defeat the IJN's air arm, while crews trained in the use of that equipment and continually revised tactics for both offensive and defensive air operations. But, Ford finds, Fleet commanders were never really content with their equipment, doctrine, procedures, level of per-

sonnel expertise, or intelligence. Most importantly, and contrary to conventional wisdom, the introduction of advanced aircraft like the F6F *Hellcat* and F4U *Corsair* neither solved all problems of air defense nor obviated the need to refine doctrine, tactics, and procedures. ONI, however, practically disappears from this part of Ford's story. Analyses of new information and the concomitant devising of appropriate responses to it occurred in forward areas, absent intelligence personnel. Still, Ford could have explored more deeply this failure of ONI to provide the intelligence assessments that the Pacific Fleet needed, even if the reasons for that failure were beyond its control.

Another gap in the analysis appears when Ford asserts that the new equipment available in 1944-45 was neither decisively superior nor in adequate supply, but does not identify the causes. Were there production bottlenecks on the home front this late in the war? Were there problems in the Navy's own supply procedures? Was the US technological lead less dramatic than we have been led to believe?

Ford concludes with a good, succinct summary, and revisits the concept of strategic culture—a fascinating classification that should have figured more prominently throughout the book. “The U.S. Navy's experience during the Pacific War therefore illustrates how organizations that follow a realistic military culture, and have a clear idea of their aims along with the means to achieve them, are more likely to create an objective evaluation of their environment” (221). Along these lines, however, readers should understand that my criticisms of this carefully researched, well-organized, and engagingly written monograph are minor in the grand scheme of the work. Authors cannot include everything and Ford may well have fallen victim to an overzealous editorial staff.⁶ I hope Douglas Ford enlightens us with similar studies and inspires other scholars with his investigations of US Naval Intelligence in the Pacific Theater of Operations during World War II.

6. I have one significant qualm about terminology: it is misleading to use such current military doctrine terminology as “Revolution in Military Affairs” and to call intelligence a “force multiplier” in a context (the Pacific War) so different from our own. To be honest, though, I too, am guilty of this in my own work.