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Ian W. Toll, *Pacific Crucible: War at Sea in the Pacific, 1941-1942*. New York: Norton, 2011. Pp. xxxvi, 597. ISBN 978-0-393-06813-9.

Review by John T. Kuehn, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS (john.t.kuehn.civ@mail.mil).

Independent naval historian Ian Toll, author of the prize-winning *Six Frigates*,¹ brings his talent for writing engaging popular history to the critical first year of the Pacific War, when the US Navy fought to gain the initiative in a series of punishing sea battles against the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN). Beginning with Samuel Eliot Morison's magisterial, fifteen-volume history of the US Navy in World War II (1947-62) and continuing up to the fine work of recent scholars,² naval historians have recognized that the period 1941-1942 shaped everything that followed during the war.

Pacific Crucible is written in a lively, colloquial style suited to a general readership. For example, on Pearl Harbor morning, "The spectators were impressed, the flyboys were putting on a terrific show" (8). First-person testimony from oral histories and interviews further enlivens the text. Well and good. However, in retelling a story that so many readers already know, Toll must offer something new, update the record, or at least highlight previously underemphasized facts or analyses. In short, what new perspectives or evidence does he bring to the table?

Toll usefully devotes part of his a twenty-four-page Prologue to establishing context by tracing the rise of both the Japanese and US navies. But he then veers into an outdated discussion of Alfred T. Mahan, boiling his strategic thought down to an overarching emphasis on big battleships. But Mahan himself wrote shortly after the 1906 Battle of Tsushima that "The moral effect is still worse, for it is inducing, in the navy as in the public, a simple trust in bigness, and, what is worse, an absence of trust in anything but bigness."³

The book also creates the false impression of a hidebound, traditionalist navy obstructing a small number of reformers who were allowed to institute improvements only after the arrival of the navalist Theodore Roosevelt (xxi-xxiii). Finally, Toll excoriates as simplistic the "cult of the battleship," calling it (with 20/20 hindsight) "worse than useless" in the late 1930s (xxxiv-xxxv). Coming so early in the book, such a threadbare argument does not augur well.

In chapter 1, Toll writes, without citing any source, that: "Americans had been led to believe that Japanese naval airpower was a joke" (11). But Claire Chennault of "Flying Tigers" fame certainly did not think the Japanese were a joke and did his best to let others know what fearful opponents they were. Naval aviators like Jimmy Thach, Butch O'Hare, and Jimmy Flatley spent long hours pondering how to fight the vaunted Japanese pilots and their impressive Mitsubishi A6M ("Zero") aircraft.⁴ Discussing the actions of US aircraft carriers during and immediately after the Pearl Harbor attack, Toll faults V. Adm. William Halsey for not

1. Subtitle: *The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* (NY: Norton, 2006). It won the Samuel Eliot Morison Award and the William E. Colby Award, and was listed as a *NY Times* "Editor's Choice."

2. Toll lists the following in his bibliography: Jon Parshall and Anthony Tully, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2005); Sadao Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2006); and Alan Zimm, *Attack on Pearl Harbor: Strategy, Combat, Myths, Deceptions* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2011), reviewed by Ralph Hitchens at *MiWSR* 2011-036 - www.miwsr.com/rd/1204.htm. But he does not list or cite such important books as John B. Lundstrom, *Black Shoe Carrier Admiral: Frank Jack Fletcher at Coral Sea, Midway, and Guadalcanal* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2006), Haruo Tomatsu and H.P. Willmott, *A Gathering Darkness: The Coming of War to the Far East and the Pacific, 1921-1942* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), or Ronald H. Spector, *At War at Sea: Sailors and Naval Combat in the Twentieth Century* (NY: Viking, 2001).

3. "The Battle of the Japan Sea," *U.S. Naval Inst Proceedings* 32 (1906) 462; Toll seems unaware of Jon T. Sumida's *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 1997).

4. See, e.g., John B. Lundstrom and Steve Ewing, *Fateful Rendezvous: The Life of Butch O'Hare* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1997) 104-5. In fairness, they do write that the "neither the president nor the Navy brass took the threat very seriously," but this is a far cry from calling it a "joke." Toll does not cite the book.

having “thrust his two carriers into striking range” (40). But the ships belonged to different task forces: only *Enterprise* was under Halsey’s command. *Lexington* was under the tactical command of R. Adm. John Newton at Midway, flying off airplanes to the garrison there. Newton could not have chased Nagumo and his strike force on 7 December.

Of the Japanese air attack on the Philippines, Toll asserts that “The upshot was that American air forces were effectively paralyzed for lack of orders.... At dawn December 7 ... [the Japanese] set out across the China Sea to pulverize American air bases in the Philippines” (48). He is following here Mark R. Peattie’s excellent book *Sunburst*,⁵ but he conflates the attack on Clark Air Base on Luzon both with Japanese missions in the South China Sea, meant to protect their operations in the Gulf of Thailand, and with actions farther east by Mitsubishi G4M bombers in the Marshall Islands! Japan’s successes in the Philippines had more to do with bad luck than with US unpreparedness. The Japanese attack from Formosa launched at 1045, not dawn, having been grounded by fog and poor weather. Also, Gen. Lewis Brereton’s bombers, which had launched earlier to avoid being caught on the ground, had just landed in order to refuel.⁶ To reiterate: the aircraft that so damaged the US Army Air Force in the Far East did not take off at dawn and were not in fact those described in Toll’s source; the B-17s were lost to chance circumstances, not lack of readiness.

Toll’s history espouses the “great man” approach, focusing on admirals and strategists in particular: Chester Nimitz, Ernest King, and Isoroku Yamamoto all receive lengthy discussions incorporating a great deal of interesting but not always pertinent biographic data (King’s philandering, for example). This kind of thing postpones the book’s serious discussion of operations for some 140 pages, when Toll turns to the defense of Wake Island. Even then, his “chatty” treatment of strategy and grand strategy leaves little room for more substantive analysis of actual naval operations. Thus, the first extended naval campaign of the war, the defense of the Dutch East Indies by the American-British-Dutch-Australian Command (ABDACOM), occupies less than one chapter (out of twelve), far less than the early carrier raids. In fact, Toll is mesmerized by carrier operations throughout this book.

Toll characterizes the decision to recall the carrier relief forces at Wake Island as “craven,” adhering yet again to Morison’s (now widely recognized) bias against V. Adm. Frank Jack Fletcher (160). This while at the same time offering substantial data indicating the decision was correct, not craven. Regarding the battles of Coral Sea and Midway, Toll follows the party line of the naval aviation community, whose postwar accounts write Fletcher, victor at both battles, completely out of naval history (318).⁷ Like Morison, and nearly everyone since, he gives the lion’s share of the credit for Midway to R. Adm. Raymond Spruance (476–77). Evidently, the great man theory does not apply to Fletcher, whose background is not discussed, despite his being among the four or five most important American admirals of the period.

Finally, Toll chooses to end with Midway when the true “crucible” of his title was Guadalcanal. In the final analysis, *Pacific Crucible* perpetuates the same old mythology and scholarship about the Pacific War. As I have indicated, much better works on the subject are readily available.

5. Subtitle: *The Rise of Japanese Naval Air Power, 1909–1941* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2002).

6. Louis Morton, *The Fall of the Philippines* (Washington: Ctr Mil Hist, 1952) 79–85—another book Toll does not cite or list in his bibliography.

7. See (in note 2 above) Parshall and Tully, *Shattered Sword*, and Lundstrom, *Black Shoe Carrier Admiral*, for astute correctives to the conventional wisdom.