



In the Highest Degree Tragic: The Sacrifice of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet in the East Indies during World War II by Donald M. Kehn Jr.

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This detailed operational/tactical-level monograph by naval historian Donald Kehn¹ focuses on the exceedingly frustrating experience of Adm. Thomas Hart's US Asiatic Fleet during the Dutch East Indies fighting of 1941-42. The early years of the Pacific War featured very few victories for the Allied nations. But Kehn argues that "in at least one very real sense the sacrifice of the old U.S. Asiatic Fleet in the dismal Java campaign had permanent value: we had learned more, and better, from our defeats than our enemies had from their victories" (431). By contrast, the successes of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) in the East Indies infected it with "victory disease," a false sense of invincibility. This was cured at the Battle of Midway (June 1942), where the IJN lost four fleet carriers and the irreplaceable aviators of V. Adm. Chūichi Nagumo's Carrier Striking Force or "Kidō Butai" (125).

The book's well-sourced fourteen chapters present an unvarnished chronological narrative focused on the officers and enlisted sailors who operated the (in the case of the US Navy, mostly World War I-era) vessels that faced the IJN early in the Second World War. Kehn skillfully taps Japanese primary sources and overlooked memoirs that tell "the truth about the backbiting" (xi) within the short-lived American-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) joint force. The author does not chronicle the East Indies air campaign, nor, for the most part, the role of the American warships of the Asiatic Fleet in the fighting vis-à-vis their ABDA allies.

On 8 December 1941, when the Japanese onslaught began in the Philippines, the IJN enjoyed the advantages of superior numbers, more modern equipment, experienced personnel, and surprise. The ill-prepared peacetime US Navy had only recently departed from China as the Japanese approached. When the fight for Manila Bay quickly ensued, the US fleet's main assets were ordered to proceed to the Dutch East Indies. The ships they left behind, including the old submarine tender USS *Canopus*, fought on gallantly until the fall of Bataan in early April 1942.²

In the East Indies, the Americans joined the Dutch, British, and Australians to form the first combined Allied HQ in World War II. Admiral Hart found himself briefly in command of the ABDA naval strike force, until Dutch Lt. Adm. Conrad Helfrich replaced him through "behind-the-scenes machinations" (201). This was the time of a "short, unhappy relationship between the inhabitants of the East Indies, including the Dutch themselves, and the Western military forces sent to act as allies" (75). For example, the Dutch failed to provide pilot boats to the vulnerable US warships waiting anxiously in the submarine-infested waters off Surabaya. It soon became painfully obvious that "Western resources were much too thin to cover the entire length of the Indies

1. He is official historian of the Naval Order of the United States, Texas Commandery, and author of *A Blue Sea of Blood: Deciphering the Mysterious Fate of the USS "Edsall"* (Minneapolis: Zenith Pr, 2008).

2. See, further, W.G. Winslow, *The Fleet the Gods Forgot: The U.S. Asiatic Fleet in World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1982) chap. 10.

from Sumatra to Timor” (64). Each allied nation had its own defense priorities, which put the Asiatic Fleet in jeopardy after it had abandoned its main base in the Philippines; it never had enough resources to meet the expectations placed upon it.

Kehn recounts the various battles that ABDA fought against the IJN, such as Badoeng Strait (18 Feb. 1942), where the light cruiser USS *Marblehead* and destroyer USS *Stewart* were badly damaged. He makes astute use of Japanese sources in describing how sailor Watanabe Daiji, aboard the destroyer *Michishio*, mistook a US “flushdecker” destroyer for a light cruiser because each had the four funnels of World War I-vintage ships (183).

Marblehead escaped to Ceylon, while *Stewart* reached the Surabaya drydock, where it was subsequently scuttled after sustaining further damage. The weaker ABDA ships were fortunate if they escaped attacks by the IJN’s powerful *Asashio*-class destroyers (156). Kehn notes that the Japanese raised the *Stewart* and recommissioned it as Patrol Boat #102! The repurposed vessel went on to a second career as a “tough Cramp boat” (189) until surrendering to the Allies in September 1945.³ A surprise Japanese carrier air raid on faraway Darwin (19 Feb. 1942) devastated the Australian port and sank some fifteen vessels, including the old Asiatic Fleet destroyer USS *Peary*, an “ideal target” (194) for the marauding attackers.

Kehn discusses the many problems of the ABDA’s fledgling command structure, for instance, in communications. It suffered from an “unsteady foundation of imperfect understanding and conflicting priorities” (65). As the Japanese closed in on Surabaya in late February 1942, the remaining destroyers under Cdr. Thomas Binford wasted time waiting for the cumbersome ABDA HQ to order them to depart. Binford finally used the more direct “green” telephone line and was told he could depart (392). But one of his ships, the USS *Pope*, still carrying a number of torpedoes, had to remain behind to escort the damaged British cruiser HMS *Exeter* and the destroyer HMS *Encounter*—“The cards had been dealt; Binford’s four ships drew a winning hand; [Lt. Cdr.] Willie [Welford] Blinn’s *Pope* did not” (393). Thus, destroyers USS *Edwards*, *Alden*, *Paul Jones*, and *Ford* managed to escape to Fremantle, Australia, in a harrowing transit, while *Pope* fought on; when it did finally try to escape, planes from the light carrier *Ryujo* and nearby cruisers cracked its hull “like an eggshell” (414). The heavy cruisers *Ashigara* and *Myōkō*—“two long dark shapes ... on the horizon” (417)—arrived and sank it.

Chapter 10, “Six Days to Oblivion,” centers on the ignominious end of the old aircraft carrier USS *Langle* (refitted as a seaplane tender), which, Kehn writes, should be “recognized by posterity for the miscarriage it in every respect was” (196). This obsolete support vessel with “no real combat value” (195) was charged with ferrying fighter planes badly needed in Java. Unfortunately, the trip from Australia to the East Indies was to be its last; its fate proved the folly of letting an ally, in this case the Dutch under Admiral Helfrich, dictate American warship employment.

This was a case of politics and propaganda overriding military strategy, for the choices that were made functioned as political gestures rather than strategic—let alone operational or tactical—schemes. The Curtiss P-40E fighters that *Langle* transported were not going to change Java’s fate, and American planners clearly understood this. Even so, they allowed the mission to take place... Although *Langle* suffered only light casualties at the time of her abandonment—thanks to fine ship handling and courageous rescue work from the destroyers with her—the operation quickly went from bad to worse. Through American efforts to succor their Dutch allies, two more U.S. vessels in addition to *Langle* were needlessly lost, this time with a tragic and heavy human toll. (195)

3. See Lodwick H. Alford, *Playing for Time: War on an Asiatic Fleet Destroyer* (Bennington, VT: Merriam Pr, 2012).

Kehn presents the men of the Asiatic Fleet not as heroes, but as flesh-and-blood mortals, liable to human error, from admirals to common sailors. Political decisions made far from the Pacific theater too often bore little relation to the combat realities and caused pointless loss of life in the name of political exigency. Kehn writes of *Langley* that “few American ships were faced with such a daunting, or thankless, mission during the Pacific War—or one rendered so invisible by supervening political factors” (189).

The book has a couple of shortcomings: first, as so often in military histories, adequate maps are missing, although some fifty photographs and other illustrations, some previously unpublished, are welcome enhancements. Second, though its lively narrative will appeal to any reader, a better grasp of naval terminology and concepts would have strengthened Kehn’s analyses.

In the Highest Degree Tragic tells an even-handed, riveting story of the last days of a fleet that fought loyally against great odds in a chaotic time of sweeping defeats. “Upward of 1,800 Americans gave their lives” (429) serving in the Asiatic Fleet in 1941–42. We must be grateful to Donald Kehn Jr. for helping preserve their memory: “Textbooks and best sellers ignored them then as they continue to do so today.... Nonetheless it is my belief—and has been for decades—that they still deserve more fundamental recognition for their sacrifices” (432).