

## International Journal of Naval History

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April 2009

Volume 8 Number 1

Buckner F. Melton Jr., *Sea Cobra: Admiral Halsey's Task Force and the Great Pacific Typhoon*. : Lyons Press, 2007. 336 pp. Maps, illustrations, bibliography and index.

Bruce Henderson, *Down to the Sea: An Epic Story of Naval Disaster and Heroism in World War II*. Smithsonian Books, 2007. 384 pp. Illustrations, bibliography and index.

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Within the past two years a great deal of attention has been focused on the killer typhoon that sank three destroyers and damaged numerous other ships of Admiral William F. Halsey's Third Fleet in mid-December 1944. Bob Drury and Tom Clavin were the first to draw widespread attention to the event with the publication of their book *Halsey's Typhoon* (reviewed in the *IJNH*, December 2007, Vol. 6 No. 3). Drury and Clavin's account was quickly followed into print by Buckner F. Melton Jr. in his book *Sea Cobra*, and more recently by Bruce Henderson in *Down to the Sea*. While detailing what was essentially the same crisis, all three books provide unique insights and different observations that help illuminate why this enormous and deadly storm managed to inflict so much harm on Halsey's Big Blue Fleet.

While Drury and Clavin provided a well crafted adventure story, it has been left to Melton and Henderson to provide more historically precise accounts of the storm labeled Typhoon Cobra. Of the three versions, Melton's is the most wide-ranging and non-judgmental. Specifically, Melton does not place the same emphasis on the sinking of the destroyers *Hull*, *Spence*, and *Monaghan* that is found in the other works. Instead of pursuing culprits in the demise of the three destroyers, Melton opts to discuss the effects of the storm on Halsey's entire fleet. His straightforward approach to the typhoon and Halsey's December mission in support of General Douglas MacArthur's efforts to regain the Philippine Islands does not seek to place blame on any of the mariners whose lot it was to brave the tempest. In short, Melton's is a tribute to the bravery of all who weathered the storm. According to Melton, "I have tried to remember my place. I have little if any right to criticize decisions and actions taken by men who were feeling the pressures of combat and violent weather at sea, defending the United States at the risk, and often the cost, of their lives" (Melton, p. 275).

In much the same manner as Drury and Clavin, Melton offers a vivid description of a storm that surpassed the worst fears of a host of experienced sailors. An able writer and one not prone to making errors similar to those of the aforementioned authors in regard to terminology and concern for historic detail, Melton does well in bringing the

perils of facing winds in excess of 120 knots and waves nearly 100 feet to life for readers more than three generations removed from the event. Although he provides maps displaying the relative positions of various components of Third Fleet, Melton addresses the storm in a manner that makes the dangers appear slightly more uniform to the members of Halsey's fleet than in the accounts offered by the others. By not making the ill-fated destroyers the focus of his account, Melton avoids the need for constantly resetting his points of reference in his narrative and is thus able to tell of this storm in a fashion that reinforces the sense of a shared struggle against nature.

Unfortunately in declining to offer critical analysis Melton provides a history that fails to measure up to reality. All men are not equal and in the face of extreme circumstances there are just as likely to be failures in character and judgment as there are occurrences of competence and heroism. Melton includes the reminiscence of survivors whose testimony is essential to all three recently published versions of this story, yet in Melton's account there is no place for the settling of scores. Unless Melton was somehow unaware that his subjects had more to reveal, he has done a disservice to history. In both *Halsey's Typhoon* and *Down to the Sea* the actions of the commanders of the three destroyers lost in the storm are intensely scrutinized. In particular, LCDR James Marks of the USS *Hull* comes in for scathing criticism from the ship's surviving crewmen. If Melton was aware of this criticism and found it distasteful, he should have sought additional testimony to balance accounts and provide a version of this story that would be of greater value than any yet in print. However, if no such information was available and Melton merely ignored what made him feel uncomfortable, than he has not produced an account that is true to the available evidence.

By far the best account of the storm and those who were forced to suffer its wrath is to be found in Bruce Henderson's *Down to the Sea*. Henderson has surpassed both Melton and Drury and Clavin with regard to accomplishing the tasks of writing a compelling story about the sailors put in harm's way and in avoiding inaccuracies. A former Navy weatherman who instructs writing at Stanford University, Henderson would seem to be ideally suited to write the best account of this storm and in no way does he fail to meet the loftiest of expectations.

Both Henderson's and Melton's considerations of the typhoon are well documented, but Henderson provides the more satisfactory history. Unlike Melton, Henderson does not hesitate to delve into all facets of this disaster, including the culpability of the captains of the three destroyers lost to the storm. In Marks, his 1938 USNA classmate Bruce Garrett, and 1937 USNA graduate James Andrea, Henderson finds three relatively unseasoned commanders who were overwhelmed by a nightmare scenario that only Marks would survive. While Garrett escapes with the least criticism, perhaps due to the exceptionally sparse number of *Monaghan* survivors (six), the actions of the other two officers receive ample attention. Considering the effects of the weather, the characteristics of the Farragut and Fletcher class destroyers, and the recollections of survivors, Henderson assembles the most convincing account of how the storm did its greatest damage and why three young commanders lost their ships.

Beyond his willingness to tackle the most important questions associated with the storm, Henderson also demonstrates that he is searching for a greater degree of accuracy than can be found in the first of the recent storm stories. Specifically, where Drury and Clavin devote time to telling the story of Keith Abbott, a man who has alleged to be a seventh *Monaghan* survivor, Henderson appropriately and convincingly debunks this claim in a footnote (Henderson, p.290). Superior attention to detail, suppleness of prose, and clear critical analysis make *Down to the Sea* the most satisfying account of Typhoon Cobra and the men who sailed in its path.

(Note: The views expressed in this review are those of its author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force Academy, the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the U.S.Government.)



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