

International Journal of Naval History

October 2002

Volume 1 Number 2

H.P. Willmott, *The War With Japan: The Period of Balance, May 1942 - October 1943*
(Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002)

Part One of the Total War: New Perspectives on World War II-Series. \$17.95 Paperback,
\$60.00 Cloth

Review by Douglas Ford

H.P. Willmott's most recent publication, *The War With Japan*, offers an analytical narrative of the shifting balance of power in the Pacific theater during the months between the Battle of Coral Sea in May 1942 and the US counter-offensive against the Gilbert Islands in November 1943. The author of a number of works on the Pacific War, including *Empires in the Balance: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies to April 1942* (1982) and *Grave of a Dozen Schemes: British Naval Planning and the War Against Japan, 1943-45* (1996), Willmott has provided both detailed accounts of the major campaigns as well as an insight into the reasons why the Japanese and Allied high commands pursued their respective strategies.

The War With Japan reappraises the strategic situation prevailing during the critical months after Japan completed its conquests in Southeast Asia during early 1942. The conventional view is that following its defeat at Midway, Japan's depleted front-line naval strength meant its forces had lost the initiative; an Allied victory was therefore inevitable. However, Willmott argues that until November 1943, both Japan and the US found themselves dealing with a situation unforeseen prior to the outbreak of war. To use a recurrent phrase, the initiative was like a gun lying in the street: it was there for either side to pick up and use. Consequently, both sides realized the necessity of achieving and maintaining the strategic initiative.

When Japan accomplished its objectives in Southeast Asia by May 1942, her naval leaders faced the need to eliminate the US Navy's counter-offensive capabilities. The failure to sink the American carrier fleet at Pearl Harbor meant the Imperial Japanese Navy's key objective remained unfulfilled; hence, the decision to seek a decisive engagement in the Central Pacific, with diversionary moves in the Solomons. For the US, Japan's conquest of Southeast Asia threw off balance its war plans prior to December 1941, which called for use of the Philippines as a forward base. American forces now needed to remain on the defensive and to fight in areas of the enemy's choosing. The

naval encounters at Coral Sea and Midway thus signified the extent to which both sides were burdened with the continuous task of devising and employing strategies ad hoc.

Although the destruction of Japan's carriers at Midway tilted the balance decisively, the Allies had yet to seize the initiative. The US decision to stage a counter-offensive through the Southwest Pacific was an attempt to do exactly this. Meanwhile the Japanese drive against Guadalcanal, in an attempt to secure a base for attacks on the trans-Pacific lifeline to Australia, required the US to divert the bulk of its forces for forestalling operations. During the naval encounter at Savo Island on August 9, and the Battle of the Eastern Solomons on August 24, the USN struggled to maintain numerical superiority against an enemy who was skilled at conducting night operations. The deadlock was broken by November, thanks to the capture of Henderson airfield on Guadalcanal, which enabled the US to conduct sustained air attacks on Japanese naval forces and sea communications, thereby destroying Japan's ability to reinforce its garrison by the end of 1942. Both sides suffered casualties at Guadalcanal that resulted in a serious depletion of their offensive capabilities.

However, a crucial factor that prevented Japan from regaining the initiative was its narrow industrial base, which in turn precluded any replacement of its losses. Furthermore, the continued American submarine attacks on Japan's merchant fleet worked to deprive the enemy of resources needed to sustain its industries, while at the same time hindering any effort to dispatch troops for the defense of its outlying territories. The US, on the other hand, was able to embark on a massive construction program, which was to result in an overwhelming superiority of ships, aircraft and ammunition. Yet this material superiority, necessary for the US to launch its counter-offensive across the Pacific and to achieve its ultimate victory over Japan, was not available until late-1943. Hence, Willmott's argument that for the eighteen months following Midway, the strategic initiative was neither in the hands of the Allies or the Japanese.

The main strength of Willmott's book lies in its detailed explanation of the extent to which the outcome of the Pacific War remained largely undecided until the end of 1943. Nevertheless, Willmott's book suffers from three key weaknesses. First, it concentrates too much on the details of the individual battles. Oftentimes, the reader is unable to gain an overview of the various factors that determined the outcome of the campaigns. Chapter 5 (Midway), for example, begins with a detailed description of the dilemma which the Japanese faced in choosing the correct time for launching their attack. One has to read a considerable portion of the chapter before concluding that the Allied victory was largely due to the USN's effective use of signals intelligence, as well as the Japanese failure to anticipate the early appearance of US carrier-based aircraft. Secondly, the book focuses almost entirely on the naval and air aspects of the conflict, often neglecting the important role played by ground forces. A vital factor which allowed the Allies to achieve victory in the campaigns in the Solomons and New Guinea during the latter half of 1942, for example, was the US and Australian ground forces' skillful employment of a combination of fire-power and infantry tactics to uproot the Japanese from their defensive positions. In this respect, the bibliography could benefit from Eric

Bergurud's *Touched by Fire: The Land War in the South Pacific* (1996), and Alan Millet's *Semper Fidelis: The History of the US Marine Corps* (1980).

The third, and most noteworthy, weakness stems from the narrow range of sources the author has employed. The result is a book that can be described most accurately as a revised popular/general work on the history of the Pacific War, and perhaps therefore 'nothing more' than a reinterpretation of previous accounts of the conflict, with little in the way of expansive new primary research. The footnotes and bibliography consist of a limited number of general secondary works. A key by-product of this shortcoming is that in describing the formulation of strategic assessments, the book makes only passing references to the role played by intelligence collection and analysis. Key works on Japanese intelligence assessment are omitted, including Michael Barnhart's 'Japanese Intelligence Before the Second World War: Best Case analysis', in Ernest May's, *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars* (1984), and Alvin Cox's 'Flawed Perception and its Effect Upon Operational Thinking: The Case of the Japanese Army, 1937-41', in Michael Handel's, *Intelligence and Military Operations* (1990).

Nevertheless, the above shortcomings notwithstanding, its focus on how each side made use of its limited resources in a vast, unpredictable war, and how these decisions affected the outcomes of pivotal battles, is commendable. *The War With Japan* is therefore a necessary read for those ever-pursuing a better historical understanding of the course of the Pacific War.

Dr Douglas Ford recently completed a Ph.D. thesis in International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science, entitled Climbing the Learning Curve: British Intelligence on Japanese Strategy and Military Capabilities during the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific.



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