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Douglas V. Smith. **Carrier Battles: Command Decision in Harm's Way**. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006. 346(+) pp., illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, index.

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Douglas V. Smith has come up with a wonderful idea for a book. Take the five main carrier battles of the Pacific War—Coral Sea, Midway, Eastern Solomons, Santa Cruz, Philippine Sea—and investigate how pre-war officer training and US naval doctrine influenced the decisions made by the participants. Smith finds in the inter-war Naval War College text, *Sound Military Decision*, a key that he argues unlocks the process governing the commanders' actions in these battles. But here the problems start.

Professor Smith gives us only an overview of officer education in this period. He summarizes the lessons given in *Sound Military Decision*, but a deep reading should have been included. Smith's summation of the central tenets of *Sound Military Decision* is that commanders must determine the following in a given situation: a) The nature and the appropriate effect desired; b) the means available and opposed; c) the characteristics of the theatre of operations; d) the consequences as to costs. (p. 36). Smith claims that these tenets helped American admirals win the war in the Pacific. Maybe so, but they seem to this reader more like truisms than a recipe for victory.

Professor Smith's battle narratives are for the most part good, at least from the American side of the firing line. Each major battle has a chapter devoted to it, at the end of which Smith grades the various commanders' actions using the *Sound Military Decision* model as a benchmark of performance. The author is rather effusive in handing out "A's" to his star pupils, Nimitz, Fletcher, and Spruance. Yet right from the start one has a problem. Nimitz is praised for reacting to Intelligence and dispatching two of his four operational fleet carriers to the Coral Sea to foil the Japanese move on Port Moresby. Fair enough, but wasn't dividing one's force in the face of the enemy a terrible breach of the War College ideal of maximizing effort at the point of attack, and the Mahanian dictum to never divide the fleet into penny-packets? We see here a problem Smith never masters: was the action good because it flowed from pre-war training, or was it good because it worked? And if it had accorded precisely with the dictates of *Sound Military Practice* and failed, would it still have been the right thing to do?

As for the historical analysis, some added questions emerge. At Midway, Smith accuses Nagumo of “arrogance” and “intransigence” (page 18) without positive evidence other than the fact that he stuck to IJN doctrine and refused to launch an uncoordinated, improperly escorted strike once an American carrier was found. Also of note Smith quotes Japanese losses from Fuchida’s inaccurate and outdated account. One wishes that Professor Smith would have had the chance to read Parshall’s *Shattered Sword* before he wrote his Midway chapter.

The account of the Battle of Santa Cruz is heavily influenced by its complete reliance on American sources. Dull’s valuable *Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy* is never cited. Smith accepts American claims from that time as accurate without, it would seem, checking their validity. The fact that Santa Cruz could legitimately be viewed as a Japanese victory is never seriously addressed. An old chestnut of the Pacific War preempts such a possibility: if the Japanese failed to win a decisive victory (and they never did), they automatically lost because the heavy hand of attrition was always against them. Thus American historians can and do claim victory in virtually every action. By this logic, Robert E. Lee never won a battle.

The Battle of the Philippine Sea catches Smith at his most triumphal. He maintains that “[n]o victory in naval history was more complete” than Philippine Sea. Perhaps, but Salamis, Trafalgar, and Tsushima do come to mind. Smith gives Spruance “a strong ‘A’ for every aspect of his performance” in command. I tend to agree, but many carrier admirals then, and historians since, have not, and Smith doesn’t answer their criticisms. He also doesn’t grapple with Eric Grove’s point that Ozawa fought a good battle, too. This leads to the deeper problem of Smith’s handling of the Japanese. Bluntly, Smith comes across as not committed to any deep understanding of Japanese commanders or their actions. Nagumo, Kondo, and Ozawa are props on a stage where the Americans are the stars. And Smith’s comment about the opening minutes of the Battle of the Philippine Sea—“the fun had just begun”(page 233)—indicates an unhelpful bias.

Yet on one level, Smith is dead right. The Americans were very good at what they did. They had sound doctrine, excellent training, and good officer education. Unquestionably the experience gleaned at the Naval War College helped American admirals make the right calls when the shells started flying. But greater skepticism and a more balanced presentation would have gone a long way to help actualize an excellent idea into a more valuable book.



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