

## International Journal of Naval History

---

December 2007

Volume 6 Number 3

Bob Drury and Tom Clavin, **Halsey's Typhoon**, New York : Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007. 322 pp., maps, illustrations, appendix, bibliography, and index.

Review by Professor Charles Steele

Department of History, United States Air Force Academy

---

Bob Drury and Tom Clavin's vivid account of the killer typhoon that wreaked havoc on Admiral William F. Halsey's Third Fleet in mid-December 1944 is more than an attempt to capture a forgotten moment in the history of the greatest naval war ever fought; it is also an effective study in leadership. Offering stirring accounts of heroism, the book is a fascinating and fast read for those interested in human behavior amid the unique stresses of conflict at sea. The authors detail stories of commanders reconciling their conflicting obligations to follow Halsey's orders with the need to preserve their ships and crews. There are also accounts of sailors suppressing their fears and struggling to do their duties as doom surges inexorably towards them. *Halsey's Typhoon* offers a wide-ranging narrative that is suitably peppered with first hand accounts, making the events that took the lives of 793 sailors seem extraordinarily personal to readers three generations removed from the event.

Drury and Clavin divide the story into three "books" detailing first the status of men and equipment in Halsey's fleet before progressing to segments recounting the storm that would sink the destroyers *Hull*, *Spence*, and *Monaghan* and then the rescues of less than one hundred of the approximately 900 sailors whose ships succumbed to nature's fury. In the first book, the authors adeptly introduce the saga's key characters and set the stage for this epic struggle of men against the sea. Halsey himself is initially described as a character of mythic proportions only to be shown as a flawed and fully mortal being in

the succeeding two sections. Halsey, however, is not the centerpiece of this story that bears his name. The real heroes of this story were the men who in following Halsey's orders were forced to brave the dangers of sailing through waters abounding with waves in excess of 90 feet and winds exceeding 125 knots. In the second and third books, the authors use the accounts of the sailors who endured one of the worst storms in history to describe what it was like to face so fierce a tempest, and in many instances what it was like to be cast into the sea with little hope of survival. Ultimately, the book is a testament to the peculiar difficulties of waging war on earth's grandest stage and the hardiness of those who attained victory in the Pacific.

While Halsey and his close circle of advisors seemingly could not make a right decision throughout the course of Typhoon Cobra, the story is not bereft of accounts of able mariners. One sailor whose valor and good judgment resonates throughout the story was LCDR Henry Lee Plage, a naval reserve officer whose superior seamanship and great courage were saving graces for more than half of those tin can sailors who were spared from the worst of fates in this epic ordeal. Indeed, in the books afterword the authors join ranks with Typhoon Cobra survivors to lobby the U.S. Navy to bestow upon Plage a posthumous Medal of Honor—an effort that had emphatic support from the late President Gerald Ford (another participant in the saga of Halsey's Typhoon).

Neither Drury nor Clavin are military historians, and despite its many merits, *Halsey's Typhoon* is not a carefully constructed study in naval history. Some of the errors are rather baffling, as in referring to Halsey as a commander who had “tasted triumph in the Coral Sea” a battle honor belonging not to Halsey but to Frank Jack Fletcher (p.99). The authors make other errors in their phrasing of events external to the typhoon such as commenting on the *Monaghan's* participation in a naval gunfight in March 1943 as making it a party to “the war's only old fashioned, slug it out, surface gun duel . . .” (p.81). There are other misstatements and misrepresentations that for students of the war in the Pacific may prove too numerous to forgive, and if the authors seem a bit cavalier about getting their facts straight concerning the particulars of Halsey and the implements

of war available to both sides in the conflict, one might justifiably wonder if similar liberties were taken with other elements of the story.

Occasional inattention to detail aside, Halsey's *Typhoon* is compelling reading and it does offer great examples of good and bad leadership. The story is crafted to swirl like a cyclone. Drury and Clavin offer accounts of the dangers and deeds known to sailors in one part of the storm's path and then strike out to describe the blows felt by other victims miles away, before returning to offer closure in the accounts of men and events described previously. The sharp contrast made between the responses to the hazards of the storm by the captains of the destroyer USS *Hull*, LCDR James Marks, and the destroyer escort USS *Tabberer*, LCDR Plage, make great case studies in command. While books such as Karel Montor's *Naval Leadership* offer abstract lessons in leadership along topical lines, *Halsey's Typhoon* offers leadership lessons amid the contextual coherence provided by a single historic event. Despite any of its shortcomings as a piece of naval history, *Halsey's Typhoon* is a classic account of leadership in the crucible of war and of men struggling against the sea.



The Editors  
International Journal of Naval History  
[editors@ijnhonline.org](mailto:editors@ijnhonline.org)

© Copyright 2007, International Journal of Naval History, All Rights Reserved