

1996

The Ship That Held the Line: The USS Hornet and the First Year of the Pacific War

Barrett Tillman

Lisle A. Rose

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Tillman, Barrett and Rose, Lisle A. (1996) "The Ship That Held the Line: The USS Hornet and the First Year of the Pacific War," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 49 : No. 4 , Article 27.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol49/iss4/27>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

out maneuvered them to maintain the advantage. There was no need for the suicidal infighting that had distinguished earlier battles. Nevertheless, this battle, once started, soon degenerated into a melee.

The burden that was put upon the officer in tactical command (OTC), the commanding officers, and some others at that moment, particularly if the officer was a newcomer to this kind of mayhem, seems not to have been fully recognized. Indeed it seemed to take a little exposure to this hellish environment before an OTC or commanding officer could keep his wits about him. The deafening crash and blinding flashes of one's own guns, the reports of casualties, and other matters to do with the battle all crowded in on one's ability to make decisions promptly, in logical order, and wisely. At least a little disorientation in a novice was almost inevitable, and that night the American OTC was Rear Admiral Carleton Wright, a novice—a fact that must have been known to COMSOPAC, who himself was a novice.

Crenshaw suspects that both CINCPOA and COMSOPAC were remiss in not instituting a vigorous, ad hoc training plan for SG surface search radar, however modest. By such means, a satisfactory doctrine for night engagements might have been established. But it finally happened only after Tassafaronga.

This little book provides an informative and satisfying opportunity for this member of the Black Gang of one of COMSOPAC's other cruisers to learn more about what went on topside on one of those runs up the Slot.

CHARLES O. COOK, JR.
Captain, U.S. Navy, Retired
Bristol, Rhode Island

Rose, Lisle A. *The Ship That Held the Line: The USS Hornet and the First Year of the Pacific War*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1995. 309pp. \$34.95

The Ship That Held the Line describes the one-year career of USS *Hornet* (CV 8). Best known as the means of launching the Doolittle Raid against Japan in April 1942, *Hornet* survived barely six months thereafter before being lost in the battle of Santa Cruz.

Lisle Rose obviously cares a great deal about his subject. It is an interest that was inspired by Alexander Griffin's wartime offering *A Ship to Remember*. Building on that foundation, Rose succeeds in fleshing out the institutional personality of CV 8, and he is particularly good in describing living conditions aboard a wartime aircraft carrier. From its captain to the aviators to the engineering gang, the author provides a look at the various departments that made *Hornet* run. Oddly, though, we are not told the ship's commissioning date until nearly the end of the book; the carrier sank one year and one week after breaking out its pennant.

As well as he describes *Hornet*, however, it is obvious from the first chapter that Rose is unfamiliar with naval aviation itself. The text contains more than two dozen factual or technical errors, including erroneous phraseology and descriptions. For instance, in describing an arrested landing, the author gets it backwards by stating that an aviator "made a shaky catch of number five hook." Other examples abound, including the reference to nonexistent wing guns in SBDs and other aircraft. Nor is the author better versed in organizational matters. Throughout, he refers to "Air Group 8" when he means "Hornet Air Group." The first numbered air group was CVG 9, established in March 1942; the actual CVG 8 stood up in June 1943 and had no connection with *Hornet*. Similarly,

Scouting Squadron 8 is identified as "VSB-8"—a designation that never existed.

These and other glitches should not have occurred, especially by so prestigious a publisher as Naval Institute Press. That so many avoidable errors slipped past the author, reviewers, and editors indicates a lack of internal checks in that press's ambitious publishing program, which was a whopping ninety titles in 1995 alone.

Sadly, the book's illustrations also leave much to be desired. There are only nineteen photographs and one map, and some of the photos are generic, with no relation to CV 8. Amazingly, there are no pictures of either Captains Marc Mitscher or Charles Mason. Also, the captions of some of the *Hornet* shots contain errors. As further proof that the author simply does not know his subject, page 44 shows a TBD-1 Devastator identified as an SBD-3 Dauntless dive bomber.

On the credit side, Rose acknowledges *Hornet's* severe failings, particularly at Midway. And there is much to criticize—essentially, Admirals Frank Jack Fletcher and Raymond Spruance fought the battle with two and one-quarter carrier air groups against four enemy flattops. *Hornet* at Midway represents one of the least-appreciated command failures in American history. Vice Admiral Mitscher thought his career was over, but happily he had already been selected for rear admiral and performed superbly as CTF 58 in 1944–1945. If anything, Mitscher was too loyal to his subordinates, including an unsuitable air group commander and fighter skipper. Anyone acquainted with *Hornet* junior aviators appreciates the old axiom: Why let seniority lead when ability does so much better?

Rose justifies the book's title with the selection of a short period in October 1942 when *Hornet* launched ineffective strikes against Japanese bases in the

Solomons. He contends that by keeping the pressure on the enemy, "Horny Maru" held the line at a crucial phase of the Guadalcanal campaign. In truth, the strikes accomplished almost nothing. Partly due to poor weather, there was little air activity on either side, and combat had come to a near standstill. Navy squadrons claimed just twenty-one shootdowns in that two-week period.

Although the author finishes with a thoughtful and well written epilogue, even there his unfamiliarity with his subject trips him up. Rose states that in June 1944 off the Marianas only U.S. submarines sank Japanese carriers. In fact, carrier-based TBMs sank IJNS *Hiyo*.

Assuming that the first printing sells out, the Naval Institute Press should issue a corrected second edition. Surely, CV 8 deserves a better "obituary" than it has been given here.

BARRETT TILLMAN
Mesa, Arizona

Horner, David. *Inside the War Cabinet: Directing Australia's War Effort, 1939–45*. New South Wales: Allen and Unwin, 1996. A\$49.95 283pp.

The fifty-year rule is designed to allow historical figures to leave the world's stage before historians gain access to the papers, minutes, and logs they left behind. The Australian Archives have opened some of the papers necessary to write about the inner workings, discussions, and decisions of the Australian War Cabinet and its attendant Advisory War Council. *Inside the War Cabinet* looks at the work of these two bodies as shown by the recently opened archives. The author—an appropriate person to write the first history of these bodies and their interworkings—is David Horner,