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Guadalcanal: The Carrier Battles

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102 Naval War College Review

nation of this was that Daniels passed over twenty-six rear admirals and five captains to appoint Benson the first Chief of Naval Operations, a position largely created by the reformers.

To be effective in this new office, Benson expanded the Department, and created good relations with the Secretary, and the Bureau Chiefs; perhaps even more importantly, he persuaded Daniels to give the CNO the power to issue orders directly to the fleet. This set an important precedent as hitherto, the Secretary of the Navy had determined policy concerning naval operations. Daniel's decision, in effect, made Benson (and his successors) the Chief of Naval Operations in fact as well as in name. Such changes initiated by Benson, as the authors note, depended on Daniel's liking and respect for Benson.

Much of this book concerns Benson's role in preparing the Navy for its entry into World War I. While Benson got on well with Daniels, he was less effective in dealing with his principal commander in the war zone, Admiral William S. Sims. Benson opposed Sims' pro-British policy with vigor, not because he was an Anglophobe as has been claimed, but because he believed that American and British policies were not the same. The authors write, "Benson, a convinced nationalist, did not trust any other state. He rejected the opinion held by others, notably Admiral Sims, that American and British interests were identical or complementary."

The war ended but the differences between the two admirals did not, and the two came into full public view as a result of a series of highly publicized Congressional hearings in the postwar years. The authors' arguments, suggesting that Benson's policies in conducting the naval war were more effective than Sims', are not convincing.

In September 1919 Benson retired from the Navy. He then served three Presidents as a member of the United States Shipping Board before stepping down in 1928 at the age of seventy-three. He died in 1932. A carefully researched and readable biography, this work is an important addition to naval literature.

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Hammel, Eric. *Guadalcanal: The Carrier Battles*. New York: Crown, 1987. 494pp. \$24.95

This book makes exciting reading for participants in the carrier battles and, indeed, for anyone who lived in that era. Moreover, it should excite younger generations of Americans, many of whom have not heard of Guadalcanal, but who enjoy one-on-one encounters under literary combat circumstances.

The book consists of scores and scores of personal accounts of our pilots versus the Zeros and attack aircraft of the Japanese. Indeed the account of Gus Widhelm's *Hornet* attack group fighting through swarms of alerted Zeros to the Japanese

carrier *Shokaku* reads like an aerial version of "The Charge of the Light Brigade." Ensign Roger Crow, who hit the *Ryujo* and slowed her down after the rest of his squadron missed, did so by lowering his wheels and flaps and slowing down his dive.

Of the several errors dealing with gunnery, I take issue with two statements. One, attributed to my immediate superior, the *Enterprise* gunnery officer, stated that when the planes came straight at the carrier, there was no need to lead them. Of course he meant for deflection. There was always the need to lead for trajectory and here the finely honed skills of the gunners, acquired by constant practice on sleeves, paid off. Also, the author stated that when the Japanese planes got through, as they always did, the fate of the carrier was in the hands of the antiaircraft gunners of the screen. This is not accurate because of the deflection factor and the short range of the automatic weapons. In the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, the carrier gunners' ratio of planes shot down to the screen was 2 to 1. In the Battle of Santa Cruz, it was 3 to 1. Most of the kills by the screen occurred after the aircraft dropped its bombs.

In one other case I take issue with the author because he did not have the facts. He said "Eager and ready to meet the oncoming Japanese carriers, which he knew he outnumbered in serviceable war planes, Fletcher for some days had put off the routine refueling of his fleet, particularly the carriers. When it appeared on 23 August that the overdue Japanese sally was not taking place, Fletcher ordered

the *Wasp* and her group southward to refuel." Well, the routine fueling had not been put off. The whole task force had refueled from two tankers on 18 August, just 5 days previously. I have in my possession the *Enterprise* Plans of the Day for 17 and 18 August 1942 to prove it.

Finally, we have to come to the bottom line. In spite of all the heroic encounters and attacks by our pilots, the fact is that, unlike Midway, carrier aviation was not very successful in the South Pacific battles. Yet the greater truth is that we won both of these battles in a strategic sense. In the next to last paragraph of his epilogue, the author states: "The cream of the Japanese bomber crews in both battles was downed over U.S. carriers, and many of them fell to the guns of U.S. warships, primarily the U.S. carriers that were the targets of the Japanese strikes."

And there you have it, however late in the book. In both battles we took their Sunday punch, and when it was over they had undamaged carriers but no planes. It should be axiomatic that a carrier without an air group is useless.

At the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, *Enterprise* gunners, with a healthy assist from the screen and the 50 fighters stacked overhead, cut to pieces the air group of the *Shokaku*. That carrier had to leave the scene at once for replacement pilots and planes.

At Santa Cruz, *Enterprise* gunners, with an assist from the screen and a smaller assist from the fighters, cut to pieces two full air groups. *Hornet*

104 Naval War College Review

antiaircraft gunners, assisted by the screen and fighters, cut to pieces one air group. So while the Japanese had undamaged carriers at the ensuing Battle of Guadalcanal, they had no carrier air power.

Having said all that, I heartily recommend this book to all historians and World War II buffs.

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Bradford, Ernie. *SIEGE: Malta 1940-1943*. New York: Morrow, 1985. 320pp. \$19.95

Over the centuries, some of the greatest military epics have involved the tiny Mediterranean archipelago, Malta. *SIEGE* narrates the most recent of these momentous events. Bradford draws the reader into World War II through a quick recount of Maltese history, impressing upon the reader the strategic importance of Malta through the centuries. His work begins with a quote from Queen Elizabeth I on the 1565 siege: "If the Turks should prevail against the Isle of Malta, it is uncertain what further peril might follow to the rest of Christendom."

Prior to the outbreak of the war in the Mediterranean, both the British and the Italians realized the strategic value of the island. However, the British failed even to take measures for the defense of the islands. According to Bradford, there were just four antiquated Gloster Gladiators available to meet the initial Italian strikes on Malta, and these were expro-

priated Fleet Air Arm property that had been sitting in crates on the island.

Though Rommel wrote that "Without Malta, the Axis will end by losing North Africa," he seemed to forget his prophetic words when a choice had to be made between Operation Hercules, (the oft-planned and canceled Axis invasion of Malta) and the continuation of offensive operations against Egypt. Also, as Bradford explains, Malta is a forbidding place for amphibious actions—there are few suitable sites and at the time of the siege these were all heavily defended, and the terrain did not lend itself to a repeat of the Crete operation. Certainly, Hitler did not want to be distracted further from the Eastern campaign, nor did he especially trust the ability of the Italians to successfully handle their part of the operation. However, perhaps the greatest obstacle was the *Luftwaffe* and *Regia Aeronautica* overconfidence in strategic bombing. While Malta was almost totally neutralized during the heaviest bombing, the bombing was stopped just at the point when neutralization was achieved. The British were then able to rebuild the island garrison's strength and renew attacks from Malta on the Axis' SLOCs to North Africa.

In an attempt to be both social and military historian, Bradford fails to do justice to either role. Further, the work is lacking in charts that would clarify details of the siege, a "lessons learned" or epilogue section, and parallels drawn with other campaigns in the war. Especially