the construction of a dizzying maze of tunnels and caves which honeycombed key positions on the island. The underground defensive works offered Japanese troops a good measure of protection from American bombardment and were mutually supporting in case one position came under attack.

The new Japanese tactics came as a complete surprise to senior American officers at Peleliu, and as their men became mired down in rugged terrain on the island’s central highlands, they had few fresh ideas. Major General William Rupertus, commander of the 1st Marine Division, insisted on aggressive direct attacks into the Japanese stronghold, with predictable results. Rupertus persisted under the notion that Japanese defenses would collapse under repeated attacks and had no idea how to adapt to changing enemy tactics.

Largely due to a lack of tactical flexibility in the senior command, Marine infantry suffered ghastly casualties. Not until October would American commanders fully understand that the Japanese were waging a grim battle of attrition and change their own approach accordingly. Increasingly, infantry attacks would rely heavily on overwhelming firepower including armour, artillery, and close air support. This measured, combined-arms approach finally reduced the island’s Japanese garrison, and likewise reduced the numbers of American casualties.

Author Wheelan pens a riveting account of one of the Pacific Theatre’s least understood battles. His research relies heavily on primary sources including official correspondence, after-action reports, and Japanese records; the text likewise includes numerous veterans’ descriptions of the horrific fighting of the two-month-long battle. Bitter Peleliu consequently contains a judicious mix of scholarly analysis and riveting combat accounts.

As such, Wheelan’s book will appeal to seasoned students of the Second World War as well as casual readers with an interest in military history. Although further research on the battle is undoubtedly in order, Bitter Peleliu constitutes a worthy contribution to the historiography of the epic war in the Pacific.

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In Screams of the Drowning, Klaus Willmann tells the story of German soldier Hans Fackler during the Second World War. He also briefly sheds light on the sinking of the SS Wilhelm Gustloff during that conflict.

Willman opens with an exploration of Fackler’s childhood and his take on
the events going on around him at a period toward the end of the Second World
War. He then moves into an exploration of Fackler’s training and indoctrination
into the Hitler Youth, and his experiences on the Eastern Front. Following
that, he explores trips to field hospitals and Fackler’s eventual transfer and
evacuation on the SS Wilhelm Gustloff.

This is not a technical examination of the strategy and tactics employed on
the Eastern Front. Nor will readers find a deep analysis of battles and tactics.
Hans Fackler’s experiences do, however, provide a first-hand account of the
average German soldier on the Eastern Front at war’s end. For example, the
discussion of disparities in equipment throughout the German Army, and
the rapidly deteriorating situation at the front is both intimate and chilling.
Although students of military history may not find anything particularly new
or revealing in Fackler’s story, those less familiar with the topic will find the
book a readable introduction to the period while more advanced students will
find it a solid piece of non-technical background to events on the Eastern Front.

Despite its vivid description of the Eastern Front, Screams of the Drowning
suffers from a number of shortcomings. The events surrounding the sinking of
the Wilhelm Gustloff may not be well known outside the context of maritime
or military history, but the author only addresses it briefly. Within the confines
of 192 pages, Fackler does not board the ship until page 105, the ship sinks
six pages later and he is rescued by page 117. Of course, the actual sinking
occurred quite quickly and a passenger below decks, like Fackler, would not
necessarily be aware of the technical situation regarding the state of the ship or
the nature of the attacks. Lack of access to such information accounts for the
limited explanation of the sinking, not the author’s inability or unwillingness to
explore the facts. As a memoir, the text does not refer to primary or secondary
sources, which limits the work as an academic resource. While the author
does not draw direct conclusions, readers should cross-reference political or
strategic comments against other sources for a more complete picture. Finally,
it should be noted that this is a translation of a transcription of a memoir.
Students who read this in the original German, may find additional context or
nuance not present in the English transmission. Since the translator does note
that some sacrifices and changes from the original were necessary, readers
should remember that some things are lost in translation.

Screams of the Drowning offers an engaging account of one man’s
experience during the Second World War. While of limited academic value, the
memoir does shed light on a little-known aspect of the war that students at all
levels should find useful. Perhaps the questions it provokes will encouraging
further exploration of the war on the Eastern Front.

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