

as light bedtime reading or as a fun addition to any library. The audiobook version, narrated by Robert Fass, is also very well done and available for those who may prefer it.

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**Mark Stille and Jim Laurier (illustrator). *Japanese Combined Fleet 1941-42: The IJN at its zenith, Pearl Harbor to Midway*. Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, [www.ospreypublishing.com](http://www.ospreypublishing.com), 2023. 80 pp., illustrations, tables, maps, reading list, index. UK £15.99, US \$23.00, CDN \$31.00, paper; ISBN 978-1-4728-5643-2. (E-book available.)**

The Combined Fleet, the striking force of the Imperial Japanese Navy, almost appeared unstoppable in the early parts of the Second World War. Through a combination of guile, superior training and organization, and extreme risk-taking, Japanese naval forces bested the Americans at Pearl Harbor, secured access to the rich resources of the southern region in the Pacific, hit the northern Australian port of Darwin and bases on Ceylon, and forced the British fleet in the Indian Ocean to retire. Few other fleets in history had enjoyed such success and notoriety against the odds until their major losses and defeat at Midway. Therefore, it is fitting that the inaugural offering in Osprey's Fleet Series belongs to the remarkable run of the Japanese Combined Fleet at the height of its achievement. Naval historian and former intelligence officer Mark Stille, one of Osprey's most prolific authors, is paired again with artist and graphic designer Jim Laurier, who specializes in military aviation.

The book establishes the basic format and content for the new series with four sections focused on the fleet's purpose giving background information, the types of ships comprising the fleet and their technical attributes, operation of the fleet in terms of organization, command and control, doctrine, intelligence, and logistics, and finally a combat analysis of the fleet in battles and major engagements. A list of further reading has no fewer than seven books by Stille.

According to the first section, the Combined Fleet dated back to 1903, just two years before the Imperial Japanese Navy announced its capabilities to the world by handing the Russian fleet a crushing defeat at the battle of Tsushima in 1905. For the Japanese, this success apparently supported naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan's ideas about the concept of decisive battle to gain command of the sea. By the interwar years, the United States Navy was identified as the most likely enemy. Design and construction of Japanese warships conformed to negotiated treaties, although the Japanese regularly built above limits and eventually withdrew from the accords entirely. Despite

the prevalence of decisive battle doctrine centred around the battleship, the aircraft carrier and naval aviation received greater attention once Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku took charge.

The second section gives details on the fleet's fighting ships through text and comparative tables. Offensive-minded, the Japanese perfected the use of torpedoes, longer range guns, the massing of strike aircraft trained intensely in dive bombing, and low-level launching of torpedoes. Despite these obvious strengths, Stille argues that deficiencies in command and control, air defences, intelligence, and logistics hampered the Combined Fleet once war began. The Japanese never developed pre-war bases, even at strategic places under their direct control like Truk atoll, which could accommodate and protect the ships of the Combined Fleet. Although somewhat better situated after the capture of Singapore from the British, the Combined Fleet sent ships suffering from battle damage, wear, or in need of repair back to shipyards and naval facilities in the Home Islands, thereby limiting effective strength at crucial times.

The fourth section analyses the Combined Fleet in combat from December 1941 to June 1942, covering the major operations planned and undertaken. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbour was certainly audacious, but it was hardly the crippling blow imagined because the Japanese missed the American aircraft carriers and land-based fuel storage tanks when the last attack waves were cancelled. The combined fleet helped to roll up American forces by invading Guam, Wake Island, and the Philippines, before turning to the real prizes in Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, which were a principal source of desperately needed raw resources. During the Battle of Java Sea on 27 February 1942, the Combined Fleet inflicted real and psychological losses on British, American, and Dutch naval forces with long-range torpedoes and guns, in accordance with pre-war doctrine. Japanese and American aircraft carriers later clashed in the battle of Coral Sea, each losing one sunk and another badly damaged necessitating withdrawal for repairs. The Combined Fleet felt those losses dearly as Yamamoto planned to employ its full strength in a major operation centred around Midway in an attempt to lure the American fleet into battle on unequal terms. Problems with the plan dispersed forces so that they could not support each other. American signals intelligence and codebreaking helped lead to the sinking of all four Japanese aircraft carriers on the day of battle. This derailed Japanese ambitions and forced a decisive shift from the offensive to the defensive for the rest of the war. The Combined Fleet never recovered.

The illustrated book includes original commissioned art, three dimensional diagrams of fleet formations and deployments, and maps, all in full colour. Accompanied by explanatory text boxes, Laurier depicts scenes from several pivotal moments: planes launching from the carrier *Hiryu* for the attack Pearl Harbor, Japanese destroyers during the battle of Badoeng Strait, and the

response of US Marine batteries to Japanese cruisers at Wake Island. *Japanese Combined Fleet* is a fine contribution to a new series and sets the standard for other historical Fleet books to follow. This small primer is packed with information and will appeal to readers interested in the opening months of the Second World in the Pacific and the rise and fall of Japanese naval power.

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**Henry Willis Wells, edited by Robert M. Browning Jr. *I Am Fighting for the Union: The Civil War Letters of Naval Officer Henry Willis Wells*. Mobile, AB: University of Alabama Press, [www.uapress.ua.edu](http://www.uapress.ua.edu), 2023. xxix+334 pages, illustration, maps, notes, bibliography, index. US \$43.95, paper; ISBN 978-0-8173-6105-1. (E-book available.)**

This is a collection letters written by Henry Willis Wells to his family during the American Civil War while serving in the Union navy. This robust collection offers a rare insight into a junior officer's experience of the war, the men he served with, and the ships in which he sailed. The letters highlight social dynamics, both of a son gone off to war relating to his family, and life aboard the smaller vessels in the Union navy. The letters are arranged in chapters based on the ship Wells served in, and where that ship was located. Browning's brief annotations give short bios of people, provide appropriate contextual background, and define unique terms. His introduction lays out Wells' biography, describes the larger collection from which these letters were drawn, and remarks on the editorial process for the collection.

A Massachusetts native, Henry Willis Wells was 20 years old when he joined the Union navy as a masters' mate, with five years of service in merchant ships. Upon joining the navy, Wells worked hard for promotion. His first ship, the screw-propelled *Cambridge*, spent time patrolling in the Chesapeake and off the coast of North Carolina. While attempting to retrieve stranded sailors, Wells was captured, passing through Libby Prison before being paroled and exchanged. Returning to service on the USS *Ceres*, he fell seriously ill, requiring hospitalization at Norfolk. Three months later he arrived in Florida serving in the *Gem of the Sea*. This six-and-a-half-month period in Key West was perhaps the most trying as the ship rarely left its anchorage. The boredom, heat, and mosquitos were relentless. For a young man seeking glory and promotion, inaction was more than irksome.

There are glimpses of Civil War battles, such as the *Merrimack's* attack on Union ships and the battle between it and the *Monitor* (pp. 71-4) and some details of raids in which Wells was involved (pp. 157-59). But his letters are