

securing the destruction of the British Eastern Fleet, which was largely due to weaknesses in Japanese aircraft search techniques combined with bad luck allowing the Royal Navy to escape as lightly as they did. It was a near run thing.

Stille is even-handed in his analysis of this episode, pointing out weaknesses in ships and their designs or capabilities, operational techniques, and leadership on both sides. Some of his judgements are perhaps overly harsh, such as his description of Vice Admiral Nagumo's handling of his carrier force as "incompetent" for example. This does not allow for the fact that there had been little opportunity to gain war experience in this, the fourth month of a carrier-oriented maritime war. Indeed, some of Vice Admiral Somerville's mistakes were similar in nature. Stille does, however, make an astute observation regarding Somerville's reckless actions in seeking to attack Nagumo's carrier force, following the RN doctrine of "offensive action" under virtually all circumstances. Somerville's decision in this regard can perhaps be blamed on criticism from Admiralty to Somerville when he was commanding Force H in the Mediterranean for a lack of "offensive spirit" against an Italian force. While it is certain that offensive action is desirable, there is a role for judgement. Throwing one's ships away in an entirely unequal contest is rarely justified. Surviving to husband resources and permitting their growth, reverting in due course to an aggressive posture, is strategically sensible. It is a fine distinction to be sure.

This is not an academic book and is not footnoted. It is a short account of the IJN's 1942 Indian Ocean incursion that, in common with all Osprey Book's productions, is lavishly illustrated with photos, paintings, and diagrams. The production quality is very high. A brief bibliography is provided that includes both older sources and more current ones, as well as a select number of primary sources (generally official accounts both British and Japanese). Overall, it provides an excellent introduction to the subject and will give all readers a succinct overview of the entire episode from the perspectives of both sides. I can recommend the book on that basis.

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**Mark Stille. *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: A New History of the World's Largest Sea Battle*. Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, [www.ospreypublishing.com](http://www.ospreypublishing.com), 2023. 320 pp., illustrations, maps, appendices, bibliography, notes, index. US \$30.00, UK£25.00, CDN \$40.00, cloth; ISBN 978-1-4728-5175-8. (E-book available.)**

*Leyte Gulf: A New History of the World's Largest Sea Battle* by Mark E. Stille is the latest book to enter the rather large collection of texts about this particular event. Stille attempts to re-assess many of the pivotal decisions, along with characters that made those decisions, to provide a new perspective on the battle. In this, he is largely successful.

Stille provides quite a bit of background detail to set the scene, going back to the 1898 war between the United States and Spain that garnered control of the Philippines for the US. This represented a strategically notable acquisition for the US considering the Philippines' geographic location in the Pacific Ocean. Both the US and Japan referred to the Philippines' strategic importance in pre-war strategy documents, and both foresaw the difficulty of defending the Philippines in the event of a war. This strategic importance was demonstrated as the Japanese advanced southwards in 1942. As Stille states early in the book: "Seizure of the Philippines was an important aspect of the Japanese campaign because of the islands' location astride the sea lines of communications (SLOCs) between Japan and her newly-won resource areas in Southeast Asia." (p. 22)

Stille provides an excellent overview of both the American and Japanese command structures in October 1944, outlining both strengths and flaws, and crystallizing just how dysfunctional the Japanese structure, in particular, was. He delves into the personalities of the main decisionmakers, providing some context to their actions and decisions.

He provides excellent detail about both sides' plans leading up to the encounter and delivers a compelling analysis of just how flawed the Japanese plan was from the start. He also describes in detail the disparity between the two sides, showing just how much American forces had advanced since 1942, while Japanese forces had regressed. The degeneration of Japanese air power is an excellent example.

Stille gives us context for the relative positions of Japanese and Allied forces describing, for example, how the air battle off Formosa influenced the Battle of Leyte Gulf, as well as the necessary, but ultimately disastrous, division of the Imperial Japanese Navy's fleet. He goes on to provide a quick overview of the amphibious invasion of Leyte before getting into the meat of the naval battle.

Stille's main aim here is to analyse the most controversial decisions of the battle, and, in this regard, his analysis is sound and well-reasoned. Criticism of commanders and their decisions is balanced and backed with evidence. Criticism of Oldendorf for not pursuing Shima's Second Diversionary Attack Force with greater alacrity at Surigao Strait is mild, and criticism of Halsey's actions during the Battle off Samar is balanced, with attention also given to Kinkaid when questioning why the San Bernardino Strait was left unguarded.

Japanese decisions, such as Kurita's decision to order a "general attack" rather than forming a battle line after initially spotting Clifton Sprague's Taffy 3, are well analysed and placed into proper context.

The most controversial decisions – Halsey's decision to leave San Bernardino Strait to pursue Ozawa's carriers and Kurita's decision not to push into Leyte Gulf following the Battle off Samar – are given dedicated chapters. Stille's analysis is fair and balanced and, as such, quite compelling. He goes beyond analysis of the tactical situation and considers the personalities of the people involved, as well as the extremes of stress and exhaustion all were working under. His assessment of both decisions is quite sympathetic. His greatest criticism is reserved for Halsey, not for his decision to pursue Ozawa's force, but for his tardy response after receiving Kinkaid's distress signals that Taffy 3 was under attack.

*Leyte Gulf: A New History of the World's Largest Sea Battle* is probably not for the casual reader with a passing interest in the Battle of Leyte Gulf. However, those seeking a deeper dive, whether familiar with the events or a relative newcomer, will surely find something of interest in Stille's work. Highly recommended.

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**Jonathan White. *Shipwrecked: A True Civil War Story of Mutinies, Jailbreaks, Blockade-Running, and the Slave Trade*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, [www.rowman.com](http://www.rowman.com), 2023. 336 pp., illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. US \$29.95, UK £22.99, cloth; ISBN 978-1-5381-7501-9. (E-book available.)**

From the title, a reader might think the story told in this book took place almost entirely at sea, during the American Civil War, culminating in a tragic shipwreck. They would be wrong. This book covers the story of Appleton Oaksmith's life at sea, the consequences of which repeatedly left him beached. It is also about his mother, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, a poet, writer and abolitionist. She was an early feminist with a strong bias for her favourite son, Appleton. Oaksmith's father, Seba Smith, was a journalist and publisher, who quickly faded from the story.

As a young man, Oaksmith joined a merchant vessel sailing from New York to San Francisco to escape a failed relationship. He kept a detailed diary in his first years afloat, providing details of his early voyages. He also wrote a lot of poetry, some of which appears in the text. Oaksmith will not be remembered as a poet.