

Mawdsley, Evan. *Supremacy at Sea: Task Force 58 and the Central Pacific Victory*

Yale University Press, 2024

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In the six months following its 7 December 1941 attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor, the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) dominated the war in the Pacific Ocean. Their means of doing so was the *Kido Butai* or “Mobile Force,” a new type of naval task force built around not just one aircraft carrier but several of them. With this, the Japanese not only devastated the US Pacific Fleet, but also conducted airstrikes on Darwin, Australia, and drove the British Eastern Fleet from the seas around India. Although the four carriers that formed the core of the *Kido Butai* were sunk at the battle of Midway, as Evan Mawdsley notes in the introduction to this book, as late as October 1942 the remaining force was sufficiently powerful to win a victory at the battle of the Santa Cruz Islands, leaving the United States Navy with just one operable aircraft carrier remaining in the entire Pacific theatre.

The two navies would not fight another carrier battle for over 18 months. When they did so in June 1944 in the Philippine Sea, however, the air wings of the *Kido Butai*’s successor, the Mobile Fleet, were almost completely wiped out in what came to be known as “the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot.” Mawdsley’s book explains how the United States Navy achieved this victory by developing its own version of the *Kido Butai* in the Fast Carrier Task Force. Known in its initial deployment as Task Force 58 (TF 58), it was used to shatter the Japanese empire’s defensive barrier in the Pacific and establish a naval dominance that endures to the present day.

As Mawdsley details, many of the elements comprising TF 58 originate in prewar legislation authorizing a vast expansion of the US Navy. While the fleet envisioned in these measures was still very much a “battleship navy,” two new aircraft carriers were approved as early as 1938. For the sake of speed, the first of these carriers, the *Hornet*, was a repeat of the earlier *Yorktown* design. The second one, however, was an improved type. This was the *Essex*, which pioneered the standard design of US “heavy” carriers during the war. Ultimately, seven of this type would serve in TF 58 in 1944, supplemented by nine “light” carriers which were built on pre-war cruiser and oiler hulls that were converted mid-construction. Nor were these ships the only wartime weapons with prewar origins; Mawdsley notes that, with one exception, all of the planes that dominated the Pacific’s skies in 1944 were designed and

ordered prior to Pearl Harbor. The war simply accelerated the production of these weapons and allowed their introduction into the theatre months, even years, ahead of schedule.

These weapons required skilled operators and complex support systems to sustain their deployment. Here is where Mawdsley identifies the wartime American improvements on Japanese practices. Where Japanese pilots remained in combat until injured or killed, the Americans rotated experienced pilots home so that trainees could benefit from their hard-won lessons. This particularly mattered as the Japanese reduced their punishing training schedules as the war went on, leaving replacement pilots with less of the knowledge vital for them to fight effectively. But perhaps the greatest American success came with the innovations in logistics as the loss of American naval bases in the western and central Pacific forced the development of mobile base systems. While Mawdsley discusses the famous innovation of the fleet train, which emerged over the course of 1943, he also gives due attention to the deployment of Service Squadrons (SevRons). These were capable of adapting captured harbours and even developing atolls into advance bases for the rapidly growing fleet. With them, the Navy possessed a far greater ability to project their forces across the ocean than the Japanese thought possible.

While these elements were introduced in the theatre over the course of 1943, they came together into a single task force only in January 1944. Under the command of Raymond Spruance and the direction of Marc Mitscher, TF 58 ranged into the central Pacific over the next five months, raiding the Japanese bases that formed the eastern defensive perimeter of their empire. These operations gave the new American pilots valuable combat experience, yet Mawdsley's disinterest in the Japanese side of the war leads him to understate the other significant aspect of these operations: the continuing attrition of Japan's air power in the region. Although he notes early in the book Japan's 1943 decision to transfer their naval aviation forces to the island airbases that formed this perimeter, he misses how the raids he describes fueled the growing gap between the respective forces. In this respect, the US victory in the Philippine Sea was determined not by the battle itself, but in the raids leading up to it as the Japanese planes deployed to counter the invasion of Saipan were mostly flown by recent trainees who proved no match for the practiced American flyers.

Despite sinking just five ships in the battle, the US Navy's victory in the Philippine Sea confirmed a naval supremacy that they have enjoyed ever since. The aircraft carrier-based task force is still a potent symbol of it. Mawdsley's book offers a useful overview of how they developed this power, albeit it is

one geared more toward a neophyte than the specialist. The book is filled with numerous small details about the ships that have only tangential importance to his subject, which is of a piece with the trivial details that are repeated periodically in the text. A sharper editor's pen would have made for a better book, which is useful as an overview of the initial deployment of TF 58 but lacks the depth of analysis to make it stand out in a crowded field on the Pacific War.

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Nancollas, Tom. *The Ship Asunder: A Maritime History of Britain in Eleven Vessels*

Penguin Books, 2022

325 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index

ISBN 9780241434147 (hardcover) £20.00; 9780241434154 (softcover) £10.99; 9780141992174 (e-book) £9.99; 9781802060492 (audio download, 653 minutes) £13.00

The last few years have seen a flood of glossy, illustrated titles with a standard format – A history of [insert subject] in [pick a number] objects. The device of using material history as a lens through which to view a wider subject has perhaps been a boon to museologists but in general has resulted in a quantity of relatively poor volumes with little more than curiosity value. That is most certainly not the case in Tom Nancollas's *The Ship Asunder*, which, while using material history to frame maritime history, does so in a way that is both intriguing and useful.

Nancollas has Cornish ancestry, and this has informed his perspective on the value of maritime history, although as an historic conservator it is not his primary field of endeavour. This combination of interests led to his previous volume, *Seashaken Houses*, a 2018 history of Britain's rockbound lighthouses. Although the author grounds this book in artifacts, he reminds us of the extent to which ships are perishable things and how little of our nautical past remains. And this absence is not just of the ships themselves, but in coastal places which are "like empty sherry casks, drained of a potency yet still fragrant with the scent" (10).

The success of the volume lies in the degree to which Nancollas is able to nimbly carry the reader from one place and one time to quite another. His skill as a writer makes this volume a hard one to put down although each