

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Sears. *Pacific Air: How Fearless Flyboys, Peerless Aircraft, and Fast Flattops Conquered the Skies in the War with Japan*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2011. 416 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-306-81948-3.

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Allert on Sears, *Pacific Air*

While prophesying the need for superiority of air power in the Pacific, General William “Billy” Mitchell was only partially correct. As it turned out, victory against Japan predominantly relied upon naval aircraft deployed through the use of the aircraft carrier.[1]

Following up on his earlier publications concerning naval aviation (*Such Men As These* [2010], *The Last Epic Naval Battle* [2007], and *At War with the Wind* [2008]), David Sears attempts to weave a cogent and compelling narrative describing the complex and dynamic relations between the aircraft industry and its designers and naval aviators and wartime requirements. Unfortunately, this attempt often comes across as disjointed; consequently the storyline fails to transition well. Additionally, while it is understandable to focus on Grumman (after all, they produced the majority of the aircraft responsible for victory), the author overlooks contributions of Chance-Vought, Consolidated, Brewster, Douglas, and Curtiss—all produced naval aircraft that were equally vital toward success in the Pacific as Grumman. Therefore, the title of the book should be renamed *How Grumman Won the War in the Pacific*. As it stands, much of Sears’s narrative relies upon work already completed by Barrett Tillman, who wrote extensively on the development of the Grumman F4F Wildcat and F6F Hellcat; therefore, nothing new is revealed. More importantly, while attempting to compare and contrast Mitsubishi to the Grumman, the author completely overlooked vital sources readily available on Mitsubishi. This results in a highly partisan book

that merely repeats the frequent trope of American triumphalism.[2] Sears chose instead to rely upon the interesting but dated accounts of Saburo Sakai and Mitsuo Fuchida. Fuchida’s version, in particular, remains problematic and has since been called into question.[3] Additionally, little effort is made to place into context the accounts from the American aviators in order to clarify what was understood then versus what we know now.[4]

So much material has already been written concerning the kinetic battles that took place over the skies of the Pacific Ocean; therefore, the tip-of-the-spear narratives from leading pilots is merely a rehash of what has often been repeated. Considering the preponderance of video and audio archives now available, Sears might have unearthed equally compelling narratives from other, less well-known pilots and crewmen.

In *Pacific Air*, Sears’s strength (and where greater effort should have been placed) lies in the behind-the-scenes industrial planning and development of aircraft manufacturing. The necessary cooperation between not only industrial and military organizations, but between various corporations was crucial for victory. The ability of markets to freely work in a collaborative effort towards a singular purpose was a trait most prevalent in American culture and it was this vital element that provided the foundation for success against the threat of totalitarian regimes. Though not as thrilling as the guns and glory action over the Pacific Ocean, Sears missed an opportu-

nity to illustrate the importance of industrial planning, design, and manufacture as it relates to victory in warfare and thus capitalize on subject infrequently covered in the annals of United States military history.

Notes

[1]. In 1925, General William “Billy” Mitchell published *Winged Defense: The Development and Possibilities of Modern Air Power Economic and Military* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons), where he asserted that surface fleets were vulnerable to attack and therefore were obsolete in the next war. This argument included the use of aircraft carriers; consequently Mitchell asserted their use in the coming war was only for auxiliary purposes (pp. 125-126). As noted in William Bradford Huie’s *The Fight For Air Power* (New York: L .B. Fischer, 1942), arguments against the use of aircraft carriers continued even after they had proved their value in the Battle of Midway. Despite their significance, individuals such as Alexander P. de Seversky and Hugh Knerr, both staunch proponents of strategic bombing, strenuously argued against building large aircraft carriers and asserted that such plans were a waste of time, effort, and taxpayer money (pp. 227-229).

[2]. Several excellent books concerning the development and operational use of Mitsubishi Zero are currently available: Jiro Horikoshi and Shojiro Shindo, *Ea-*

gles of Mitsubishi: The Story of the Zero Fighter, trans. Harold Wanteiz (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992); Robert Mikesh, *Zero: Combat and Development of Japan’s Legendary Mitsubishi A6M Zero Fighter* (Osceola, WI: Motorbooks International, 1994); and Masatake Okumiya, Jiro Horokoshi, John Gresham, and Martin Cadin, *Zero: The Story of Japan’s Air War in the Pacific as Seen by the Enemy* (iBooks Publishing, 2002).

[3]. First published in 1955 by Naval Institute Press, Mitsuo Fuchida’s *Midway: The Battle that Doomed Japan—The Japanese Navy’s Story* was accepted at face value by the American public until the 2007 release of Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully’s *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway* that utilizes official Japanese records to clarify critical elements of the battle. Additionally, current arguments in James Hornfisher’s *Neptune’s Inferno: The U.S. Navy at Guadalcanal* (New York: Bantam, 2012) assert that it was Guadalcanal and not Midway that was the vital turning point that determined the final outcome.

[4]. Alfred Kernan’s *Crossing the Line: A Blue Jacket’s Odyssey in World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press), first published in 1997 and later republished in 2007, contradicts Sears’s research regarding the death of Edward “Butch” O’Hare. Why Sears chose to overlook this book remains a mystery.

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