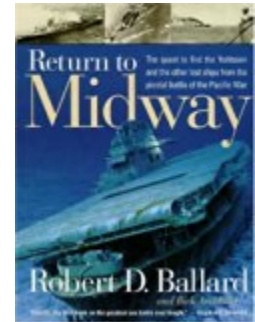


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert D. Ballard, Rick Archbold. *Return to Midway: The Quest to Find the Lost Ships from the Greatest Battle of the Pacific War*. Washington: National Geographic Society, 1999. 191 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7922-7500-8.

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Bob Ballard gets his ships. In case anyone on this list does not know, Ballard located and filmed the wrecks of the Titanic, the Bismarck, and the Japanese and American ships lining Ironbottom Sound off Guadalcanal—among others. In the case of the Bismarck and the Guadalcanal ships, he created coffee table books that combined military historical background, a narrative of the high-tech search for the wrecks, and (most of all) pictures. Contemporary photos of the ships in the 1930s and 40s, photos from the battles that sent them to their resting places, blue-tinted photos taken by robotic submersibles of the wrecks themselves, and finally the big paintings of what the vessels look like now.

In the summer of 1998, Ballard took his tried-and-true formula to the Pacific, to look for the Japanese and American ships sunk at the Battle of Midway in June 1942. Unable to locate any of the four Japanese carriers sunk, he did not fully succeed. But, he was able to find and film the USS Yorktown, the only major American loss. This book is the result.

Ballard has learned how to do his job very well, and to assemble teams that make such expeditions possible. The data on where the wrecks might be—which proved to be quite inaccurate—came from the U.S. Navy, as did the sonar and some additional technology beyond the reach of any private expedition. The funding for Ballard's part of the work came from National Geographic, whose millions made it possible to hire the very best photographers and artists. He also assembled a team of military historians, including Charles Haberlein of the Naval Historical Center in Washington; Robert Cressman, a specialist in the Yorktown itself; and John Lundstrom, whose detailed chronicles of the naval aviation war in the Pacific have

set new standards for such history. Haberlein served as Ballard's advisor during the voyage, while Cressman and Lundstrom's help can be seen in the quality of the historical half of *Return to Midway*.

The book is a half-and-half production: it is half set in 1998 (chronicling the day-to-day and sometimes minute-to-minute work of looking for the wrecks); and half set in 1942 (telling the story of the battle). Ballard alternates his narrative, setting the stage of Chapter One at Midway Island in the summer of 1998, as the Laney Chouest sets sail to search. In addition to sailors, technicians, and photographers, there are four old men on board: two Americans and two Japanese. They are veterans who had been there 56 years before. The Japanese had both been on the IJN Kaga, and Ballard hoped to find their ship. Chapter Two is set on June 2-3, 1942, and lays out the situations on the two fleets and one island which are about to be engulfed in battle. The remainder of *Return to Midway* follows this pattern, weaving contemporary and historical sections together, and ending with a final farewell to Midway Island. Today, it is home to so many Laysan Albatrosses (800,000) that airplanes cannot safely take off in daylight.

It is, of course, the historical sections that will most interest H-War readers. I found them to be—within the limits of this general-audience book—excellent. They were much better than the background chapters in Ballard's Bismarck book, and (perhaps because Midway was entirely naval and transpired in less than a week) superior to the history in *The Lost Ships of Guadalcanal*.

*Return to Midway* does not attempt to tell the entire story of the battle of Midway, something that would be impossible in just half of 180 pages, which are themselves

at least half illustrations. But Ballard and his advisers do sketch out the background: Pearl Harbor and the Kido Butai, Coral Sea, and the cryptography which put the Americans in position to intercept Nagumo's fleet. The hour-by-hour narration of the battle is well done, and Ballard uses the presence of the four veterans—three of them aviators—to personalize the air battles from both sides' perspectives.

One vignette stood out for me. Much ink has been spilled in the last twenty years on the cultural, psychological or even racial components of the Pacific War. Did sadistic, buck-toothed, near-sighted "Japs" kill our boys, whom they saw as effete and cowardly? Did Americans view all Asians as subhumans? Were the soldiers on both sides really similar young men, or were they from different worlds? When the *Hiryu* (the last surviving Japanese carrier) sank, Adm. Tamon Yamaguchi commit-

ted suicide to erase his disgrace. Such actions were not unknown in the USN: Captain Howard Bode of the USS *Chicago* killed himself after Savo. But here one of the four veterans, the reconnaissance pilot, Haruo Yoshino, remembers how he abandoned the sinking *Kaga* and was picked up by the destroyer *Hagikaze*. "On board the destroyer, I met a relative. This was a most embarrassing moment. I was a defeated warrior. He helped me dry my wet clothes. I was deeply embarrassed to appear in such a condition in front of a relative. I worried that he would tell everybody about it when he returned home." I find it impossible to imagine any American saying that.

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