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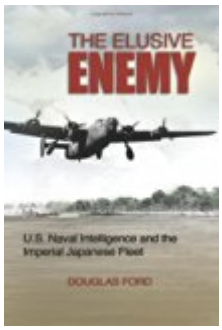

Douglas Ford. *The Elusive Enemy: U.S. Naval Intelligence and the Imperial Japanese Fleet.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011. 320 pp. $13.49, e-book, ISBN 978-1-61251-065-1.

Reviewed by John Prados

Published on H-Diplo (March, 2012)

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Conflicts usually follow a different course than participants imagine beforehand. That is certainly true in the modern era, where U.S. prewar expectations of what would happen in Iraq and Afghanistan proved quite different from what transpired once the guns began to speak. One function of intelligence is to try and close that gap. The frustrations of recent experience should actually come as no surprise. The norm is that belligerents go to war, discover their expectations falling short, and then need to learn the enemy: their tactics, their techniques, their strengths, and their weaknesses. In ***The Elusive Enemy***, Douglas Ford brings us a classic case of this process drawn from World War II.

Ford's concern is the Pacific war, more specifically the contest between the United States Navy and the Imperial Japanese fleet. Pearl Harbor demonstrated, in addition to much else, that U.S. appreciations of the Japanese adversary were wildly off the mark. Despite watching the Japanese for decades before 1941, and the vaunted achievements of American--and Allied--code-breakers, the Japanese not only succeeded in their daring attack but also ran the board in the Pacific for months afterward. Nevertheless, the American forces came back to blunt the Imperial Navy juggernaut and then, across the broad expanse of the Pacific, drive the Japanese back into their inner empire. The analyst, a British historian and author of a previous study of his own nation's intelligence activities in Southeast Asia during the war (***Britain's Secret War against Japan, 1937-1945*** [2006]), sets out to explain the intelligence aspect of this evolution. It is an important story, one that bears not only historical lessons but also ones of contemporary value.

The narrative opens with an account of American efforts to observe the Japanese during the prewar era. This is not so much a history as a thematic review. Ford touches on the U.S. naval attaches and Japanese language officers; the development of technology, in particular aircraft; U.S. war planning and calculations; and strategic culture. He concludes reasonably that American intelligence underestimated the Imperial Navy's

strength and prowess, in part by giving excessive weight to straight numerical comparisons, but also because data was scarce and imperfect. He also makes the good point that while the intelligence may have been flawed, the U.S. Pacific Fleet lacked the resources to contain the Japanese in the early war period.

Once war began the shock of Pearl Harbor and other early defeats reversed the prewar appreciations. In this construction, the Japanese became skillful, consummate warriors, and the Americans absorbed the tenets of a new strategic culture. There was a paucity of intelligence about the Japanese enemy. Indeed this lack is the author's constant refrain. In part that was due to the earlier misappreciation, but it was also the product of a war plan that assumed the need for a protracted war, which led to a long-term intelligence view. The enemy was elusive because of the intelligence uncertainties, and the U.S. Navy had to learn by trial and error how to fight the Japanese to advantage. The result was the eventual development of a new vision of the adversary, a different strategic culture.

The author's analysis is most detailed with respect to aerial combat, the subject of two of his five substantive chapters, and such technological issues as the opponents' use of weapons like torpedoes and mechanisms like radar. Ford provides extended commentaries on how observations of Japanese behavior in various battles led to notions of how to fight them more effectively, the evolution of specific tactics, and growing confidence as the enormous industrial weight of the United States made itself felt on the battlefield. He offers three essential conclusions: that combat experience was the most important source of intelligence; that the navy's "organizational culture" was an equally important catalyst; and that "racial perceptions did not play a significant role in shaping American opinions of the Japanese" (p. 2).

This book contains a fresh perspective but it would have benefited from, at least, a different subtitle. ***The Elusive Enemy*** is not really about intelligence per se, but about strategic culture. In essence what the book contributes is an analysis built on countless after-action and "lessons learned" reports from naval and air combat actions in the Pacific. A certain number of intelligence documents are cited but their number pales next to the volume of combat narratives and lessons learned summaries. Because American naval officers had a certain problem-solving attitude, such observations led to improvisations, then solutions expressed in combat tactics. From the use of radar to the evolution of the ring formation used by U.S. warships, to the innovation of the aerial maneuver known as the "Thach weave," this kind of exposition permeates the narrative (p. 81). The enemy ***was*** elusive, but it was gradually discovered and countered by close observation. The system for learning from experience, as Ford rightly says, was a product of organizational culture--and something the U.S. Navy did very well. Expressed in a certain strategic culture, that practice became fundamental to the achievement and consolidation of U.S. naval superiority in the Pacific.

Nevertheless, it does not follow that all of this was about "intelligence." If anything, intelligence is shortchanged in ***The Elusive Enemy.*** Mentions of the Battle of Midway, of which there are eleven, never include the work of U.S. codebreakers in revealing the Japanese plans. Almost all of them concern aspects of aerial operations. In fact, the intelligence from Station Hypo and the name of Commander Joseph Rochefort are not mentioned in this book. There is but a single reference to its successor, the Fleet Radio Unit Pacific, in company with its Australia-based counterpart Fleet Radio Unit Melbourne. The question of credit shared by these field units versus that for their Washington counterpart, Station Negat, is never engaged. As for photographic reconnaissance, it is mentioned in connection with identifying the characteristics

of certain Japanese warships, but there is no treatment of where photo recon came from, who did it, or the operations in the field. The coastwatchers, so important to the United States in the Solomons campaign, are not covered at all.

By making "intelligence" part of a strategic culture that assumed a protracted war--hence making desirable long-term estimates of Japanese intentions and capabilities--the author is able to exclude its main substance compared to that of the lessons learned. Ford argues that "the available intelligence also provided what was often a vague picture of the [Japanese Navy's] long-term intentions," and again, "signals intelligence was not very useful for securing information on Japanese plans" (pp. 105, 106). Apart from Midway's incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, this observation obscures the true picture. American intelligence officers, most particularly those with the Joint Intelligence Center Pacific Ocean Areas (JICPOA), *did* cast strategic estimates, repeatedly, for many major campaigns from mid-1943 onward. These estimates were based primarily on capabilities to be sure, but they reliably projected the maximum level of response the Japanese could make to given U.S. operations. Intentions were missing and in that sense Ford is correct, but the notion of projecting adversary intentions and capabilities in the sense of the modern "national intelligence estimate" hardly existed in World War II, at least in the Pacific. It was only in 1945, when Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King established a special estimative unit within his own office--under Rochefort incidentally--that anything like an intelligence "estimate" was crafted. This was not the result of some vague picture of the enemy, it was precisely a consequence of an underdeveloped American theory of intelligence combined with U.S. Navy organizational culture. The originators of estimative intelligence in World War II were with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and because OSS played only in the China-Burma-India theater in the war against Japan, it had little to say about the Imperial Navy.

Intelligence in the Pacific was supremely tactical and operational and it made enormous contributions. This "current intelligence" reporting dominated the intelligence war in the Pacific. Virtually every naval action between mid-1942 and the end of the war involved U.S. foreknowledge resulting from codebreaking--hundreds of thousands of decrypts of Japanese message traffic attest to that--photographic intelligence, coastwatchers, document exploitation, prisoner interrogation, or other pillars of intelligence. Excepting the coastwatchers, these are all touched on in ***The Elusive Enemy***, but with the lightest of hands, nothing like the mountains of text lavished on lessons learned. Yet the virtually daily tallies of how many Imperial Navy warships lay anchored at Rabaul or Shortlands, and how many aircraft were parked on their airfields, not to mention the spotting of enemy task forces or airstrikes on the prowl in The Slot, were at least as important--arguably more so--as knowing (from lessons learned) that Japanese pilots had a tendency to expose the underbellies of their aircraft when dogfighting. To write at book length about U.S. naval intelligence and the Imperial Japanese Navy without covering these aspects in detail seems distinctly odd.

That mystery--the conflation of battle observation with intelligence--results from the author's purposes. By framing the discussion as one of strategic culture, postulating a priori that the evidence which is admissible must concern long-term perspective, hence U.S. Navy efforts to evolve countermeasures, ***The Elusive Enemy*** blurs the categories. If battle observation *is* intelligence, what is to be made of the numerous lessons learned comments on the insufficient explosive charges in U.S. munitions, the adequacy of torpedoes, the learning curve on the use of radar, radar-vectoring of combat air patrols, and so forth? By this standard they are intelligence too. It

is striking in this book that the evolution of U.S. tactics and operational doctrine are a major focus, yet wartime current intelligence is not, in a work that professes to be about intelligence on the Japanese Navy.

Ford comes closest to intelligence in the occasional passages where he discusses the array of naval organizations engaged in the work. Coverage of such matters--like the prewar attaches, the Washington organization for Pacific intelligence, and the changes made in 1943--is on the mark but all too brief, and driven by the preoccupation with lessons learned. A good example is the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI)--a producer of "combat narratives," an intelligence digest, and technical reports, long-term products of the kind featured in this analysis. Let us call this "survey intelligence." The ONI's survey intelligence (like the enemy island studies produced at JICPOA) had the function of establishing a level of basic knowledge among intelligence staff officers, as well as appraising those line officers cleared for the material of Japanese (and other war theater) developments. ***The Elusive Enemy*** contains no treatment of that ***intelligence*** function but it repeatedly incorporates the ONI material in its discussions of battle observations. Moreover, there is no inquiry into ONI's evolution through the war, or the jockeying for position between it, the Office of Naval Communications, the Joint Intelligence Committee, or the intelligence field units in the Pacific.

Sometimes the lessons learned can themselves be curious. This reviewer was struck by repeated citations from battle observation, even quite late in the war, referring to the high quality of Japanese pilots and aircrew. This is at odds with what we understand from postwar Japanese accounts and it conflicts with what was established by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey and in ONI interrogations of Imperial Navy officers after Tokyo's surrender. We also see in the survey intelligence that the decline in quality of the Japanese air arm was perceived at the time. What squares the circle is the realization that battle observation is ***selective:*** that is, American naval officers could only comment on what they *saw*--the Japanese pilots who had closed to press home their attacks on U.S. task forces despite the long odds, not the numerous aerial formations that lost their way, or turned back in the face of weather that more experienced pilots might have gutted out. In an analysis that is so dependent on a particular set of source material, the author's reflections on the character of the data would have been very useful.

Having said all that, it should still be emphasized that ***The Elusive Enemy*** is a useful book. Ford has distilled an enormous body of battle observations and intelligence reporting and related these to the evolution of U.S. Navy combat tactics in the Pacific war. His inquiry endows that evolution with a coherence that is explicit, not inferred, and therein performs a service for readers and other historians. Until now this aspect of the war has been dimly known, if at all, and here Ford fills a gap. Many of the weaknesses would have been eliminated had the author explicitly framed his account to be about doctrine and tactics, or strategic culture, and not about intelligence. The practical application of lessons learned in a doctrinal transformation is the take-away message, one as valuable in today's wars as it was in the Pacific. Read Ford for this exploration of strategic culture.

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Citation: John Prados. Review of Ford, Douglas. *The Elusive Enemy: U.S. Naval Intelligence and the Imperial Japanese Fleet.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. March, 2012.

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