



Angus Britts. *Neglected Skies: The Demise of British Naval Power in the Far East, 1922-42.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2017. 272 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-68247-157-9.

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The clash between the imperial Japanese navy's *Kido Butai* (Mobile Force) and Great Britain's Eastern Fleet off the coast of Ceylon in early April 1942, known as the Indian Ocean Raid, does not stir the same imagery as the likes of Midway or Leyte Gulf. While the latter battles are recognized for their strategic importance and decisiveness, Britain's final major action before withdrawing from the East has heretofore been characterized as a minor engagement, a setback for the British navy and a trifling victory for Japan, scarcely on par with the massive actions that would follow it across the Pacific and the Philippines. In *Neglected Skies: The Decline of British Naval Power in the Far East, 1922-42*, Angus Britts sets out to thoroughly debunk this line of thinking, presenting a novel characterization of the Indian Ocean Raid and the twenty years of British political and doctrinal policies that led to it.

Britts argues that the scope and unique nature of the Indian Ocean Raid alone make it worthy of reconsideration, but goes a step further by suggesting that this clash marked the end of British naval hegemony across the world. After Admiral Sir James Summerville fell back before the *Kido Butai* in April 1942, the British navy would only return to East Asia in the literal wake of the world's then preeminent naval force: the US Navy's 5th Fleet. *Neglected Skies* traces a line that

begins with the First World War, through interwar policy, military thinking and engineering, to finish at naval battlefield tactics and decision making at the pivotal moment. Along that line, Britts's pencil occasionally swerves, leading to some interesting, if seemingly only tangentially related, chapters.

Regarding his main contention, that twenty years of political and strategic missteps led to the unequal clash off the coast of Ceylon, Britts is thorough and convincing. He explores a variety of contributing factors, both military and civilian, for why the Indian Ocean Raid turned into the pivotal clash between empires that he argues it was. The first three chapters hit hard and fast. Chapter 1 lays out the specific actions of the battle, clearly explaining the minutia of positioning and of air raids to the degree that one not familiar with naval tactics can follow with relative ease. One can clearly see that the British ships were outdated and slow, while in the air, the faster, lighter, and more maneuverable Japanese craft hopelessly outmatched the British air defenses, however tenaciously they fought.

Chapter 2 analyzes the fiscal and political troubles facing interwar Britain, revealing the Sisyphean task of maintaining military predominance across a global empire while recovering from the cost, both actual and societal, of the First

World War. Britts is convincing, most dishearteningly, in that it appeared there was little that could be done to maintain a modern fleet with the required capabilities. Ships, both the refitting of older vessels and the construction of new ones, are prohibitively expensive, and Whitehall's recovery plans meshed with the idea that war could be avoided for at least a decade. Encouraging that line of thinking, the development of international mechanisms for resolving disputes, namely, the League of Nations and the multiple naval limitation conferences, ensured that Britain's navy would by no means be a modern fleet by the time conflict once again engulfed the world. By the time full-scale refitting and rearming was underway, it was already too late.

While taking these factors into consideration when deciding against appropriating blame, Britts zeros in on key factors that contributed directly to the specific deficiencies that faced the British fleet off Ceylon, namely, that of naval airpower. He summarizes himself quite well saying, "The policies pursued by Whitehall and the Admiralty during the 1920s were to fundamentally weaken the Royal Navy by ultimately preventing the effective regeneration of its warship strength and—in concert with the Air Ministry and the RAF [Royal Air Force]—to deny the Fleet Air Arm the opportunity to evolve beyond the level of a fleet-support instrument" (p. 27). Britts contends that Britain's failure here was the result of mismanagement of air resources, developing interservice rivalry, and a stubborn attachment to naval doctrine that refused to see an air wing as anything other than a useful, if limited, support apparatus. The writing of the importance of naval airpower was not yet on the wall, and Britts is careful to explore, throughout subsequent chapters, how and why Britain's naval airpower developed how it did. He is less forgiving when early battles against the European axis exposed the new preeminence of naval airpower.

Chapter 3 specifically addresses the misstep of naval aviation by both analyzing the way the Admiralty chose to bargain with the RAF, and through an exploration of naval air engineering. The Admiralty insisted on two-seater biplanes for the majority of the 1930s, while competing forces, specifically Japan's, were busy improving on designs for single-seat monoplanes. By the time of the Indian Ocean Raid, the Japanese bombers, dive-bombers, and especially their fighters, could outmaneuver and outperform the British craft with ease.

Thus, by the end of the third chapter, Britts has explained well how and why the fleet action off the coast of Ceylon had ended the way it had, and by so doing, signaled the forfeiture of East Asian waters by Britain to Japan, until, as it is noted, the US Navy could bring its full industrial weight to bear. The remaining chapters of the work move beyond this topic, to probe related incidents and naval planning while maintaining sometimes tenuous connections to the Indian Ocean Raid. They are all equally interesting and well researched, but their place in this particular volume seem questionable.

Chapter 4 relates the lessons learned, or ignored, in the first years of the war. Naval clashes with Germany and Italy, both of whom eschewed Mahanian ideas of decisive fleet actions for the more sinister *guerre de course*, in which raiding and pinprick attacks were favored, demonstrated the difficulty Britain faced in managing actions across such vast expanses of open water. Yet, in fighting across the Atlantic, across the North Sea, and in the Mediterranean, the Admiralty found that naval air was exceedingly effective, especially in the case of the battle of Cape Mattapan. Similarly, the Admiralty learned quickly what damage could be done to the success of naval operations should they find themselves within range of the Axis's superior aircraft coming from land-based airfields. In fact the Admiralty admitted that if only the two Axis air forces had cooperated more

and been able to maintain sustainable air control, there would have scarcely been any way for the British to succeed in the Mediterranean. The connection between this topic and the thesis of the work is understandable, but it begins to drift into a more general assessment of British naval actions and the importance of airpower at sea.

Chapter 5 explores the Japanese navy's development, and effectively explains how and why the Japanese brought an aircraft carrier fleet to the fight in 1941. The Washington Naval Conference's restrictions and the sheer cost of developing a navy to match that of the United States forced ingenuity, and while the Japanese navy continued to seek a decisive battle, the realization that naval airpower could make up for a lack of actual tonnage led to an increased push for development. Here Britts also attempts to explain the rationale behind Japanese strategic thinking. His sources often seem appropriate for this task, relying as he does on secondary literature and translated post-war interviews. Yet he falters in his attempt to counter the established scholarship regarding the rise of militarism in Japan. His source, a postwar naval officer's interrogation, does not sufficiently override modern scholarship on the complexity of the struggles within Japan in the 1920s and 30s.

Chapter 6 diverts to explore a different battle, the destruction of the ill-managed Force Z, which in December 1941 suffered greatly in an attempt to stem Japanese invasions in the Gulf of Siam. This chapter is interesting, as it explores how unrefined and essentially racist expectations of Japanese naval and aviation skill contributed to the failure of the mission. Also highlighted are the lack of available resources and the overwhelming fact that Japanese naval aviation, especially as new airfields in the Dutch East Indies were taken, presented an almost impossible challenge in the early years. Such was the number and skill of the Japanese pilots that Allied seamen scarcely had a moment's respite as they attempted to navigate the Dutch East Indies.

Chapter 7 returns to the Indian Ocean Raid to explore how and why this engagement resulted in a loss of British dominance at sea. Here we move toward the technical issues on display and once again reiterate the unfortunate state of the British navy at the outbreak of hostilities. Britts reminds us of the inferior quality of the ships available in the Indian Ocean, and that Japan's Operation C, which launched the raid, intending to find and destroy the Eastern Fleet, had brought the carriers of the *Kido Butai*, which completely mismatched the available British resources. Britts also examines the different approaches to tactics taken by each fleet, concluding that the concentrated *Kido Butai* handily outdid the integrated British Fleet. Including a counterfactual assessment of what could have been had Summerville's forces been different highlights the almost impossible situation the Admiralty faced in the East, especially when the conclusion, based again on a lack of naval resources, only marginally differs from what actually occurred. Suffice it to say, Summerville's withdrawal was the most prudent course of action, but one that still surrendered control to the Japanese.

The last two chapters again deviate into related but probably unnecessary discussions about the difficulties facing Britain in maintaining control over its vast empire. The important conclusion here is to note that Australian thinkers were already well aware and concerned about the potential threat a Japanese-German alliance could pose to a distant and small colony like Australia. Reality saw these concerns realized as Japanese naval superiority threatened the Australian coast and the retreat of the Eastern Fleet meant Australia had to hold its breath and wait, fearful of an invasion that thankfully never materialized.

Britts's research is detailed, though the inclusion of German, Italian, and especially Japanese sources would have enhanced the chapters dedicated to them. This lack is less apparent in the chapter dealing with the European axis, as the fo-

cus remains on Britain's naval strategy and its ability to deal with emerging naval aviation threats. The chapter on Japan suffers more because of Britts's attempt to explain not only military planning but also growing nationalism and the rise of militancy within the nation. While secondary sources are often sufficient, there seems to be an overreliance on postwar confessions of naval officers. Aside from these admittedly minor missteps, Britts uses numerous and appropriate sources, and his exploration of Britain's naval development in the period is as thorough as one could wish.

Britts's work is a success. Though the average interested reader can glean all they need to in order to understand his argument from chapters 1 through 3 and 7 exclusively. The remainder of the work can best be seen as related, and interesting, essays that supplement the argument while not containing any of the key elements themselves. The inclusion of counterfactuals can be useful, and Britts employs them relatively well here to underscore the apparent deficiencies in British material and strategic planning. Structurally, the odd placement of timelines and maps of battles throws off the pace of what is an otherwise well-written and clear work. The decision to frame certain chapters around the contemporary or near contemporary publications of thinkers and strategists deviates enough to hamper the flow, but it does not diminish the quality of the work and occasionally succeeds at hammering home the fact that the issues under scrutiny here were not unknown at the time. Overall, Britts communicates the depth of naval strategy and the technicalities of naval aviation well enough that one unfamiliar with these things before picking up the work can easily make sense of what is an understandably complicated field.

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