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George R. Tweed, *Robinson Crusoe, USN: The Adventures of George R. Tweed RM1c on Japanese-Held Guam, as told to Blake Clark*. 1945; rpt. Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2010. Pp. viii, 309. ISBN 978-1-59416-111-7.

Herbert Laing Merillat, *The Island: A History of the First Marine Division on Guadalcanal*. 1944; rpt. Westholme, 2010. Pp. xii, 283. ISBN 978-1-59416-113-1.

Russell Grenfell, *The Bismarck Episode*. 1948; rpt. Westholme, 2010. Pp. 232. ISBN 978-1-59416-110-0.

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“What were people reading during World War II?” Westholme Publishing recently answered that question by republishing three “critically acclaimed titles of the World War II years,” as part of its series, “America Reads: Rediscovered Fiction and Nonfiction from Key Periods in American History.”¹ All nonfiction, the books tell of one man’s harrowing fight for survival on an enemy-occupied island, a crucial turning point in the Pacific told from the point of view of the First Marine Division, and the action-packed hunt for a fearsome battleship in the North Atlantic. Although it does not appear that Westholme chose these particular books because of a common theme, all three project a sense of immediacy rarely found in more recent accounts of World War II. The narratives powerfully demonstrate how war at every level (one man, one division, one navy) is affected by preparation, determination, innovation, resilience, and chance.

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Even the most imaginative novelist could not create a better case study of the maxim that fortune favors the prepared mind than that of George Raymond Tweed. Tweed was an eighteen-year veteran Navy Radioman First Class on 8 December 1941, when Japanese artillery fire and bombers announced the invasion of Guam. The small U.S. force of about four hundred on the island was quickly overwhelmed and surrendered almost immediately. Tweed and five others rejected that option and escaped into the bush to await rescue by the U.S. Navy, which they confidently estimated would take less than six weeks. They were wrong by twenty-seven months. Only Tweed survived to greet the American invasion force on 11 June 1944. His successful two-and-a-half year struggle to evade concerted Japanese efforts to capture him was punctuated time and again by close calls and lucky breaks. The woodsman’s survival skills acquired during his boyhood in the vast forests of central Oregon, the Navy’s military and technical training, and his genuine affability enabled Tweed to capitalize on opportunities fatally fumbled by his fellow American holdouts.

Although *Robinson Crusoe, USN* immediately conjures up the vivid image of a man trapped on an island, more than one reviewer of Tweed’s account noted its inapt title.² For, unlike Defoe’s *Crusoe*, Tweed was neither lost nor isolated. He and more than twenty thousand native Chamorros knew he was on the thirty-mile-long island of Guam. So did the Japanese Imperial Army, which numbered nearly eighteen thousand troops there by 1943.³ Though the Japanese never found Tweed, they knew him by name, put a price on his head that increased over time, and pressed Chamorros into search parties along with hundreds of Japanese soldiers to systematically hunt for him. Rather than a solitary companion like Friday, who appeared relatively late in *Crusoe*’s island confinement, a succession of Chamorros immediately began hiding

1. See the “America Reads” page at Westholme’s website <www.miwsr.com/rd/1017.htm>.

2. See, e.g., the review by Orville Prescott, “Robinson Crusoe, USN: The Adventures of George Tweed, RM 1/c, USN, on Jap-Held Guam,” *NY Times* (13 Apr 1945) 15.

3. See Wakako Higuchi, “Japanese Military Administration of Guam,” *Guampedia* (updated 18 Nov 2009) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1018.htm>.

and feeding Tweed, risking their own and their relatives's lives. Their assistance was invaluable, but the Chamorros' innate sociability compelled them to tell their families and friends about him. Tweed was a combination of local hero and curiosity; one of his temporary protectors displayed him like an animal in a cage: "Here he is.... I keep him here. I feed him" (109). But, while the Chamorros seemed constitutionally unable to keep a secret among themselves, they never let the Japanese find Tweed, despite monetary rewards and ruthless torture.

The book proceeds directly and chronologically from the Japanese invasion through Tweed's harrowing escapes to and from a succession of more than a dozen major hideouts—including his final eleven-month stay in a remote cliff-top cave from which he recorded Japanese movements on land and sea—to "the most exciting moment of my life" (229), when he recognized the sound of U.S. bombers approaching the island. The U.S. Navy soon appeared on the horizon, but a week passed before Tweed finally caught the attention of one of the ships with the reflected glare of a broken bit of mirror. He then struggled down the cliff to the beach far below to await rescue. His nerve-wracking race against Japanese guns trained on the destroyer and Japanese soldiers who spotted the small rescue craft heading to shore began only after long, tense communications between Tweed and the USS *McCall*.⁴ One of the book's most gripping scenes has Tweed desperately trying to overcome the skipper's understandable skepticism that semaphore signals from home-made flags on the distant cliff were, in fact, an American's call for help and not a Japanese plot to lure him within firing range.

Journalist Blake Clark wrote the book in a distinctive, chatty, first-person style that must have reflected Tweed's own voice. Every human emotion is expressed with unvarnished directness; the reader rides the same roller coaster of fear, relief, joy, anxiety, boredom, and loneliness that Tweed endured. But loathing of Japanese brutality—the beheading of captured American sailors and the torturing of Chamorros who tried to help them—registered most viscerally and kept him focused on survival:

As soon as [Limty, a Chamorro] could walk, the Japs took him to jail and started the beatings all over again. Still he never told. When I heard this, I felt like walking into town and killing as many Japs as I could before they killed me. It wasn't right for me to cause people like Limty and Joaquin to be tortured. I felt ashamed of myself for wanting to save my life.

Then I thought, "What if I do kill half a dozen Japs? When they get me, the fight's over...." I wasn't going to let those bastards win out over me. I'd have my revenge when the Americans came back. I lived for that day. I took heart, too, from what Mrs. Johnston [a Chamorro] said. If I gave myself up, it would mean to the natives that I no longer believed the Americans were coming back, and they might knuckle under to the Japs. As long as I held out, the natives, too, would have hope (138-39).

No doubt Tweed's tale of courage, daring, and hope was rushed into print within months of his rescue because those qualities remained in great demand on the U.S. home front in 1945, while the war was still raging. For military and civilian leaders, his firsthand reports of Japanese atrocities would also have been a timely way to steel Americans' hearts to what appeared inescapable at that time: an invasion of the Japanese homeland, with equally inevitable and unprecedented American casualties. More than sixty years later, *Robinson Crusoe*, *USN* still vividly brings a world war to life on a very personal level.

Herbert Laing Merrillat was also an eyewitness to much of what he wrote of, but *The Island* is no memoir. Merrillat had abandoned his job as a bureaucrat in the Treasury Department and joined the Marines in early

4. Not identified in the book, perhaps for security reasons. But see *Dict. of Amer. Naval Fighting Ships*, s.v. "McCall": "By 4 July, the fast carriers were again raiding Iwo Jima. They then steamed back to the Marianas where *McCall*, with *Gridley*, took up patrol off Guam, 10 July. At 1820 on the 10th, *McCall's* crew observed a heliograph from a cliff south of Uruno Point. Identifying the operator as friendly, a motor whaleboat, manned by a volunteer landing party, was dispatched to effect the rescue of the message sender. In spite of being within range of 6-inch coastal batteries, the rescue was accomplished and George R. Tweed, RM1c, USN, having been on Guam since 1939 and in hiding since the Japanese occupation, was brought on board. With him he brought information on Japanese strength, morale, prelanding casualties, and disposition of troops and guns" <www.miwsr.com/rd/1019.htm>.

1942, and it was both as public relations officer and official historian of the First Marine Division that then-Lieutenant Merillat waded ashore on Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942. *The Island* is neither public relations piece, nor true official history, nor academic history; rather it combines elements of all three. Much of it is written in the first person, though one man could not have seen all the action described, and that is occasionally confusing. The great strength of this narrative—that its author was present during the action and also had direct access to a vast array of official reports and participants in the battle—is diluted by Merillat’s failure to cite his sources beyond a string of acknowledgements in his preface.

For Merillat’s home front audience, however, the lack of footnotes was a small price to pay for the opportunity to read a detailed account of the First Marine Division on what needed no more precise description than “The Island.” To the average American in 1944, Guadalcanal was, indeed, “THE island,” and largely because “of what [the Marines] gave and took in the long struggle with the Japanese for possession of Henderson Field, the key to the Solomons” (vii). Accounts of other U.S. combatants and tales from the Japanese would have to wait to be told—some for decades. Not until Richard Frank’s *Guadalcanal*⁵ was there a truly comprehensive, integrated narrative of the campaign. Merillat’s focus may be narrow in terms of later historiography, but it was surely wide enough and deep enough for its day.

Merillat presents his story chronologically in three parts. The first details the Marines’ deployment to (often ill-suited) staging and practice areas in the South Pacific, the surprisingly uncontested landings on Guadalcanal, and the first wave of fierce Japanese counterattacks. The second part of the book embraces the bulk of the Marines’ campaign on Guadalcanal, which teetered between victory and defeat from September through November. Merillat devotes a chapter to each of the most notable battles, beginning with “The Battle of the Ridge,” where Colonel Merritt A. Edson and an initial force of three hundred Fifth Marines faced a Japanese force more than five times their strength. “Smashing the Sendai Division,” tells how Japan’s famed Sendai (Second) Division’s largest—and last—major ground offensive to retake Henderson Field shattered against the Americans’ grim resolve. “The Crisis in November” was, according to Merillat, “the gravest we ever faced on Guadalcanal” (203). Fierce U.S. naval and aerial assaults halted the enemy’s final desperate effort to re-take the island, defeating a Japanese invasion force carrying as many as thirty thousand reinforcements and costing Japan twenty-eight ships and thousands of soldiers.

In the last part of the book, Merillat relates—with first-person authority—the relief the First Marines felt leaving the island on 9 December 1942. And he concludes with a very short “Retrospective,” as befits military history written during the war it describes. Throughout, Merillat highlights the poor planning, missed opportunities, and the role of pure chance in episodic victories and defeats on both sides. He could not have known in 1944 that Guadalcanal would be (according to later historians) “the turning point of the war,”⁶ but he felt its iconic significance in his bones. His prescient retrospective is both perceptive and biting:

The Guadalcanal campaign had not been on a large scale compared with the huge operations which final victory in the Pacific and in Europe would entail.... As the only active sector in the South Pacific except for New Guinea, however, Guadalcanal had been the magnet for powerful Japanese forces and a sink-hole for Japanese strength.... Of the larger strategy of the war, which led to the original attack on Guadalcanal, with limited means employed according to hastily made plans, I cannot speak, for I know nothing of it. The high councils which decided upon the venture will doubtless make the reasons known in their own way. I can only say that those to whom fell the honor to initiate that first United States offensive in the Pacific entered upon their task and carried it out with enthusiasm and zeal. Their success against great odds, against an enemy hitherto unbeaten, quite properly has made “Guadalcanal” a symbolic name and given it a unique place in our military history (237–39).

5. Full title *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (NY: Random House, 1990).

6. *Ibid.* 614.

Merillat's book may have been "critically acclaimed" when it first appeared, as Westholme claims, but it has not stood the test of time as well as his later memoir, *Guadalcanal Remembered*⁷ (still in print and used in military history courses). Greater availability of documents from all sides, disciplined sourcing, and better writing have produced works of superior academic value and popular appeal. In his "Preface" to *Guadalcanal*, for example, Frank cites several excellent accounts of the campaign without mentioning *The Island*.⁸ But the first person he acknowledges for his assistance and encouragement is "H.C. 'Chris' Merillat."⁹ Clearly, Merillat's contributions to our understanding of the Battle of Guadalcanal stretch beyond the pages of this book.

"Stretch" also suits Westholme's claim that Americans were reading *The Bismarck Episode* during World War II, since the book was first published in 1948.¹⁰ Of course, Americans had read a great deal about the *Bismarck* in newspapers seven years earlier, before the United States was officially at war. The compressed drama of 21–27 May 1941 was—and remains—a riveting tale, from the moment the Admiralty suspected that the *Bismarck* might have put to sea, to its shockingly swift and utterly demoralizing destruction of the Royal Navy's legendary HMS *Hood*, through the agonizing hours of its pursuit until British units ultimately sank the crippled German behemoth as it struggled toward France for repairs. Even Russell Grenfell's inherent British reserve¹¹ cannot dampen the fires of the story he relates:

By 10 a.m. the *Bismarck* was a silent, battered wreck. Her mast was down, her funnel had disappeared, her guns were pointing in all directions, and a cloud of black smoke was rising from the middle of the ship and blowing away with the wind. Inside, she was clearly a blazing inferno, for the bright glow of internal fires could be seen shining through numerous shell and splinter holes in her sides. Her men were deserting their guns ... and occasionally jumping over the side, to escape by watery death from the terror on board.... And her flag still flew (184).

In the main, though, this is a dispassionate, chronological, narrative history of the British Navy and Admiralty, written by one thoroughly familiar with the terrain. Captain Grenfell, a distinguished Royal Navy officer, served aboard the HMS *Revenge* at the Battle of Jutland and later taught at the Royal Naval College. Unlike Merillat, who took part in the events he recorded, Grenfell played no official role in the *Bismarck* episode, but like him, he had official blessing in preparing his account and nearly unlimited access to British sources. He includes a gracious but mind-numbing list of acknowledgments, but seldom cites his sources. He does, however, provide perceptive insights into the conduct of the Royal Navy during the action, as when he concludes the book by saying: "There could be no stronger argument for the principle of decentralization than the conduct of the outlying forces on this occasion; and no better example, since that of Nelson, of the willingness to decentralize by an admiral in command" (202).

The seven years that elapsed between the events he described and the book's publication enabled Grenfell to answer (in a few helpful footnotes) some of the questions that swirled around the participants. More recent examinations of the *Bismarck's* demise have incorporated valuable information from German sources, but answers to many questions that still bedevil historians disappeared forever beneath the Atlantic along with the battleship and over two thousand of her officers and crew.

7. Herbert Christian Merillat, *Guadalcanal Remembered* (Tuscaloosa: U Alabama Pr, 2003). Merillat's name appears in print variously as Herbert Laing Merillat, Herbert Christian Merillat, and Herbert Christian Laing Merillat. From his recent obituary: "Herbert Christian Merillat, 94, an expert in international law who wrote two books about the Battle of Guadalcanal, which he had seen firsthand during World War II, died April 10 at his home in Washington"—*Washington Post* (30 Apr 2010) <www.miwrs.com/rd/1020.htm>.

8. Frank (note 5 above) viii.

9. *Ibid.* xi.

10. London: Faber & Faber; U.S. ed.: NY: Macmillan, 1949.

11. Beginning with the book's very title, *The Bismarck Episode*—a mere "episode"?

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The “America Reads” series is a terrific concept, which Westholme could improve by adding a publisher’s note to provide some context for each volume.¹² Between the covers, the books are just as they were originally published,¹³ with no information about the impact of the events described or how later scholarship has increased our understanding of them. Westholme neither provides proof of the books’ critical acclaim nor explains why such acclaim in the 1940s makes them worth reading today. Tweed’s story will always be a classic tale of survival against incredible odds, and Westholme has done a great service by republishing it. But better sourcing and writing have produced accounts that surpass Merillat’s and Grenfell’s. Moreover, the latter falls outside the stated time frame for this series. While Westholme need not disclose precisely how it selects books for the series, it should take care not choose books that so readily raise the question.

12. If legal reasons precluded adding materials to the original in republication, Westholme might have provided such information at its website and noted that on the back cover.

13. Though *Robinson Crusoe*, *USN* originally carried a subtitle on its cover: *The Adventures of George R. Tweed RM1c on Jap-held Guam*. For the 50th Anniversary edition (Barrigada, GU: Pacific Res. Inst., 1994), “Jap-held” became “Japanese-held.” Westholme prints no subtitle on the cover and uses the text of the anniversary edition inside the book. These alterations from the original should have been noted, particularly since the word “Jap” appears throughout the book.