



Midnight in the Pacific: Guadalcanal: The World War II Battle That Turned the Tide of War by Joseph Wheelan.

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Three quarters of a century after the Second World War, new histories of its major campaigns and battles continue to appear. Many of these are narrative histories geared to a popular audience. While they seldom offer new interpretations of their subject matter, they can often complement more scholarly works by drawing on personal accounts in oral histories, letters, and diaries to capture the experience of ordinary soldiers, sailors, and airmen. The best of this genre, notably Rick Atkinson's *Liberation Trilogy*,¹ can engage and instruct both specialist and general readers. *Midnight in the Pacific* falls into this category.

As a seasoned journalist and author of several works on the Civil War,² Joseph Wheelan combines a knowledge of relevant archives with an exceptional gift for storytelling. His new account of the Guadalcanal Campaign (7 Aug. 1942–9 Feb. 1943) effectively integrates earlier work³ on the individual experiences of combat soldiers in the jungles of the Solomon Islands and New Guinea into the larger interpretive framework of Richard Frank's magisterial study⁴ of the campaign.

After a brief sketch of the context of the campaign, Wheelan shifts directly to the beginning of his story—the landings on Tulagi and Guadalcanal. He then follows events all the way through the Japanese evacuation six months later, filling in pertinent background on the larger strategic picture and individual participants as necessary. Aside from occasional errors, such as the conflation of the British surrenders of Hong Kong and Singapore (60), and a lack of attention to the simultaneous campaign waged in New Guinea, the author demonstrates a good control of context and enables the reader to easily follow the course of the campaign. He also sometimes pulls back from his main narrative to appraise the performances of various commanders, persuasively identifying the reasons for some of the successes and failures of American and Japanese forces, without recourse to facile stereotypes and generalizations about the combatants on each side.

Throughout, Wheelan presents the men who fought as humans, not supermen. In his discussion of conditions on Henderson Field, the airstrip that the Americans captured and used to help fend off Japanese counterattacks, he describes the heroics of US pilots and the shrewd adaptations they made to overcome the deficiencies of their aircraft.

Tired, stressed and irritable, and weak from chronic diarrhea and malaria, the flyers' hands often shook when they smoked cigarettes, which they did whenever they were not flying. They took to calling themselves the "Nameless Wonders of the Bastard Air Force." "We were a sorry looking group," wrote Ensign Harold Buell, the dive-bomber pilot from Flight 300, "thin almost to emaciation, in faded, patched, but clean khaki uniforms, bearded with a certain gleam in the eye that

1. Viz., *An Army at Dawn* (NY: Henry Holt, 2002), *The Day of Battle* (id., 2007), *The Guns at Last Light* (id., 2011).

2. Most recently, *Their Last Full Measure: The Final Days of the Civil War* (Boston: Da Capo, 2015).

3. Esp., Eric Bergerud, *Touched with Fire: The Land War in the South Pacific* (NY: Viking, 1996).

4. *Guadalcanal* (NY: Random House, 1990).

would not go away.” Flight surgeons examined the pilots and told [Gen. Roy] Geiger’s chief of staff, Colonel [Louis] Woods, that most of them were unfit for duty. “They’ve got to keep flying,” Woods replied. “It’s better to do that than to get a Jap bayonet stuck in their ass!” It was noted that the pilots’ effectiveness sharply dropped after four to six weeks at Henderson. (94)

Having described conditions on the level of the individual flyer, the author considers how well the higher-ups understood things, combining personal accounts and official records. To the extent that translated sources allow, he handles the Japanese side of things in a similar manner, juxtaposing common soldiers’ letters and diaries with military records bearing on the deliberations of the higher-ranking leaders who tried to alleviate their hardships (265–68).

Wheelan evokes the human dimensions of the Guadalcanal campaign by a discerning use of firsthand accounts. Thus, he presents Japanese army officers as overconfident and disdainful of their enemy’s fighting abilities; he describes the Japanese military system as inflexible and ill-suited to modern industrial warfare, adducing specific evidence. The leaders of the Imperial Japanese Navy, conscious of their inability to replace their ships, were overly cautious and so missed chances to capitalize on their initial superiority in training, tactics, and armament before the overwhelming might of American industry swamped them with new ships and aircraft. He presents Japanese airmen as, initially, more dedicated and skilled and equipped with better fighter aircraft, but unable to recover from attrition. Eventually their losses of experienced pilots allowed American pilots to defeat them in dogfights despite their inferior aircraft.

Wheelan’s assessments of American personnel jibe with the findings of current scholarship. The Navy was poorly prepared for night fighting and many of its leaders did not perform well in combat. But they were aggressive, especially after Adm. William Halsey took over fleet operations around Guadalcanal; this increased the Japanese inclination toward caution. Over time, the Americans learned to use their superior radar technology effectively and brought in newer, more powerful ships to negate the earlier Japanese advantages.

Wheelan presents a balanced account of US pilots and ground troops: he highlights their ability to adapt to their environment and enemy, as well as the tendency of Army leaders to deploy their freshest, least experienced troops in difficult assaults and maneuvers. Of course, he pays close attention to the Marines, who went in first and suffered the most during the Guadalcanal campaign. He emphasizes that they started out underprepared, poorly equipped, and out of shape after too many weeks aboard transport vessels waiting to land. In what amounted to on-the-job training at Guadalcanal, they learned to be excellent jungle fighters even as their strength was sapped by tropical disease and inadequate rations.

Following other scholars, Wheelan sees the Guadalcanal campaign as a turning point in the Pacific War; his account of its early stages shows how closely matched both sides were and just how near the Japanese came to victory. In the end, however, the Americans simply had too many planes, ships, guns, tanks, and supplies to be defeated by the overstretched Japanese. And, too, the Americans adjusted to changing circumstances more quickly than their enemy.

The author only briefly (in his acknowledgments) discusses his research and does not comment on the lack of new oral history material. Unlike historians who wrote in previous decades, he has not been able to add much to the primary source material for the Guadalcanal campaign, especially in the category of oral history. In the absence of many now nonagenarian survivors of Guadalcanal, he has perforce made do with secondary literature and published primary documents. With that proviso, Joseph Wheelan’s new book is a fine model for historians interested in telling stories of war to a new generation of readers.