

Books Ahoy: A Veterans Day Salute to the U.S. Navy

Written by Jack Sparacino

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Tuba's back was sticky with sweat. His mouth was dry as every one of his senses concentrated on landing the plane. The F-14 roared across the stern of the carrier. Fourteen feet over the deck. Just where Tuba wanted it. Rosie's eyes darted left. She could see the LSO platform zoom past her. Then the carrier's tower on her right. The Tomcat slammed onto the deck. Tires screeched. The tailhook banged on the greasy metal deck sending sparks flying... It was well past midnight before Tuba, Rosie and the other Tomcat aviators had calmed down enough to fall asleep. They awoke the next morning at eight o'clock to begin work all over again. – Douglas Waller:

Air Warriors: The Inside Story of the Making of a Navy Pilot

(New York: Dell, 1998)

As Veterans Day nears, we are moved yet again by the immeasurable service provided to Americans by our men and women in uniform. With a son serving as a corpsman in the navy, and having worked myself for a major defense contractor, I proudly offer a grateful salute this year. My special focus is on books that chronicle the stunning valor of our sailors and marines during the most pivotal of cataclysmic horror shows to have infested the planet, the great fulcrum of World War II.

Seven remarkable books that help define our national legacy. Without these incredible veterans and the examples they set, none of us would likely enjoy the privileges and opportunities we savor today. The spirit of their devotion is scarcely more appropriately recognized and revered than on Veterans Day.

1) Alvin Kernan: **Crossing the Line: A Bluejacket's Odyssey in World War II** (New Haven: Yale Library of Military History, 2001)

Alvin Kernan, a hardscrabble smallish kid from rural Wyoming with outsized spunk and a sharp mind, joined the prewar U.S. Navy in 1941 to have a job and secure regular meals. Quickly thrust into WWII, Kernan served in wide ranging combat roles on some of our mightiest ships, including the carriers *Enterprise* and *Hornet*. His recollection of so many richly etched specifics of life at sea and on leave is remarkable, especially since he wrote this memoir nearly fifty years after he discharged with his \$300 separation pay and the newly attained rank of chief petty officer.

Beyond all the details of life as a weapons expert, paint chipper, mess hand, and member of heroic aircrews, Kernan's writing is both gripping and poetic. He spares us little, thankfully, of what it was really like on the hangar and flight decks, in the intense card games, and even in the water when his plane went over the side on a failed takeoff. *Crossing The Line* is a simply terrific read. We are very fortunate that Professor Kernan had the wherewithal to complete this wonderful personal book so artfully.

2) Ian Toll: **Pacific Crucible: War at Sea in the Pacific, 1941-1942** (New York: Norton, 2011)

Pacific Crucible is masterfully researched and written with balanced attention to both the Japanese and American gyrations leading up to and following December 7, 1941 at Pearl Harbor. The detailed narrative focused on the immediate aftermath of the horrendous, sickening attack on Pearl is gripping. Especially including Mr. Toll's description of FDR's agonized walk to the podium to address a packed, temporarily hushed Congress on December 8, his leg braces clicking loudly enough for all to hear. I had to put the book down for a moment and dial up this famous "infamy" speech on YouTube which brought a lump to my throat. The character portrayals are fascinating, the attention to political nuance and battle sequences alike masterful. And the author's treatment of the critical battle of Midway is superb. Mr. Toll is both a fine historian and a magnificent storyteller.

3) Ian Toll: **The Conquering Tide: War in the Pacific Islands, 1942-1944** (New York: Norton, 2015)

In the world of naval historians, Mr. Toll evolves in this sequel to *Pacific Crucible* as the human embodiment of a trifecta. He combines superb research with highly polished writing skills overlaid with a towering talent for integrating disparate threads and themes—including gritty details—into a majestic portrait of the core years in the Pacific war. *The Conquering Tide*

includes 542 pages of text that are as richly textured and nuanced. One is tempted to devour this book quickly as it is entirely engrossing, and yet most passages are rich enough to invite multiple readings.

Throughout the book one is struck by the fine balancing between coverage of all U.S. military services and both sides of the war—ours and the Japanese. While the U.S. Navy shines throughout like the beacon of freedom it was, the massive efforts and victories achieved by the marines, army and air force are given careful attention. The combat scenes are show stoppers. "From the decks of the American ships, the bombardment of Betio presented a dazzling spectacle. Orange-red muzzle flashes lit up the sea in a quarter circle to the south and west of the island. The shells whistled like freight trains and drew incandescent arcs across the night sky. The entire length of Betio blazed like a funeral pyre. Sheets of flame ascended hundreds of feet in the air... The marines cheered wildly at each successive blast."

Our submariners are provided glowing credit for the sometimes relatively unheralded work they did, which was badly undermined by extremely poorly performing torpedoes early in the war. As Toll notes, "By war's end, the Pacific submarine force would sink more than 1,100 *marus* [merchant vessels], amounting to more aggregate tonnage than Japan had possessed on December 7, 1941. With fewer than 2% of all naval personnel, the submariners could claim credit for more than half of all Japanese ships sunk during the war, and 60 percent of the aggregate tonnage."

All the top brass are given due attention, so fans of King, Nimitz, Spruance, Turner, Vandegrift and the rest on our side probably won't be disappointed, but special attention is also given to numerous more junior officers and rank and file sailors and airmen such as Alvin Kernan. Toll is a master at weaving diary quotes, letter excerpts, news media material and much more into his narrative. Famous battles that one suspects one already understood, such as those in the Solomons and Marianas, are brought to life with such vibrancy that one almost feels like taking a shower after each chapter to clean off the cumulative grime and, often enough, gore. One thrills to the story of Lt. Ralph Hanks' exploits off Tarawa on November 23, 1943, when he became an "ace in a day" by

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