

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

New Guinea and the Marianas **by Samuel Eliot Morison**

Review Author: Harry S. Hudson

Philippine Studies vol. 2, no. 1 (1954): 59–62

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>

BOOK REVIEWS

NEW GUINEA AND THE MARIANAS. Volume VIII of the History of United States Naval Operations in World War II. By Samuel Eliot Morison. An Atlantic Book, Little Brown and Company, Boston. 1953. Pp. 435. \$6.00.

In contrast to most histories which usually depend on documentary sources for information and are written years after the events described, this book, like its companion volumes, was partially written during the war itself and was largely prepared by eye-witness historians. This undoubtedly accounts for the vivid battle descriptions, and the natural manner in which human interest episodes are included to provide the reader with a more graphic mental picture of the various operations and campaigns.

Samuel Eliot Morison, Professor of American History at Harvard University, approached President Roosevelt at the beginning of World War II with the idea of preparing a history of the United States naval forces while the war was in progress, rather than waiting until peace had been won and depending on official reports for his source of material. The President enthusiastically approved the idea and Professor Morison was given a reserve commission. He first served in the Atlantic Theater and was later transferred to the Pacific, where he was on active duty during the Battle of the Philippine Sea. In addition to his personal experiences, he was able to interview hundreds of officers and men of all ranks, both American and Japanese, who had taken part in the operations described.

It was the Battle of the Philippine Sea, and the preceding naval campaign supporting the occupation of New Guinea and Japanese bases on adjacent islands, that cleared the sea lanes for MacArthur's successful return to the Philippines. Of further special interest to residents of the Philippines is the fact that Ambassador Spruance was in command of the

American Fifth Fleet which decisively defeated the Japanese forces under the command of Vice-Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa in the "greatest carrier battle of the war."

Condensing into a thimbleful of words what many have attempted to say in describing Ambassador Spruance, the author says of him that he "was tried by experience and unspoiled by victory. Modest and retiring by nature, he had a healthy prejudice against publicity in any form . . . Power of decision and coolness of action were perhaps Spruance's leading characteristics. He envied no one, rivaled no man, won the respect of almost everyone with whom he came in contact, and went ahead in his quiet way, winning victories for his country."

If the reader of Volume VIII of the *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* detects an apparent bias on the part of Admiral Morison for the Navy viewpoint, it should be remembered that this is not only natural, in view of the author's naval service, but also logical, because of the nature of the Pacific campaigns. Victory in the Pacific could never have been achieved, no matter what size land forces might have been available, without superior naval forces intelligently and skillfully handled. Naval forces not only had to get allied forces to the Pacific islands, but had to support them from the initial assaults to providing supplies after the islands were secured.

There were many serious strategic and tactical difficulties constantly complicating the various naval operations. As late as early 1944 the Japanese still had a formidable navy and naval air arm that could be quickly and easily concentrated in the western Pacific to oppose Allied forces; in addition, the Japanese had scores of airbases for land-based planes on dozens of unsinkable island carriers stretching in a gigantic arc from Indonesia to the Bonin Islands.

Against these defenses it was, at first, necessary to employ hit-and-run tactics of attrition, then boldly seize the initiative, although the Imperial Navy had not yet suffered mortal harm, to break the enemy's defensive arc and entice him out for a showdown.

Contrary to some expert opinions at the time, the Japanese were seeking an opportunity to strike at the U.S. Pacific Fleet. In the fall of 1943, Imperial Headquarters directed "that the entire battle strength of the Japanese fleet be thrown against the United States Pacific Fleet, whenever and wherever it appeared, in order to destroy it 'with one blow'."

All great battles leave a legacy of moot questions for chair-borne strategists to decide. The Battle of the Philippine Sea is no exception, and the chief ones are why U. S. Navy

search planes did not locate the Japanese fleet, and why the U. S. Fifth Fleet did not destroy the enemy fleet after it had turned and run for Okinawa.

Partial answer to the first question is provided in a letter written to Admiral Morison, the author, by Ambassador Spruance last fall, in which he stated that at the time "carrier aircraft . . . were not supplied with radar . . . and we had to depend for searches entirely upon our patrol seaplanes." This requires some explanation: During daylight hours fighter planes were used for searches, but because of their limited operational radius they could not proceed far enough westward to locate the enemy. Patrol seaplanes, because of their vulnerability, could only be used at night. The Japanese, on the other hand, not only had longer range planes, but also the use of air bases on the Marianas, to the American rear, eliminating the need for their planes (if not shot down, as many were) to return to their fleet.

Admiral Spruance received only one reliable report, and for some reason it was almost eight hours late in reaching him, giving the location of the Japanese fleet. At the time, the American fleet was not within assault range of the Japanese surface forces, because during the night it had doubled back on its course toward Saipan to prevent the possibility of the Japanese making an "end run around our (U. S.) flank" to hit the American amphibious shipping at Saipan. There was every reason, indeed, to expect that the Japanese would attempt an "end run," a tactic they had attempted in the Battles of the Coral Sea and at Guadalcanal, as well as in later actions affecting Guadalcanal.

However, it was not until the first enemy air attacks that his presence within striking range of American forces was determined. With this clear indication that the Japanese were looking for trouble, Admiral Spruance did not hesitate to provide it. This leads to the second question: the apparent failure to chase and polish off the Japanese fleet after Ozawa's air arm had been destroyed. Vice-Admiral Mitscher had importuned Admiral Spruance to release the battle line to catch Ozawa. Spruance's "stern chase had already begun," but as the last contact with the enemy was during late afternoon of the battle's last day, Ozawa was able to proceed in an unknown direction under cover of darkness and was out of search plane range by morning. The chase was considerably slowed down because American carriers had to turn eastward during the night to land planes, and other ships were keeping a lookout for survivors. Ozawa was actually able to increase the distance between his surviving ships and American forces, and "it is a mathematical certainty that even the faster and

best fueled ships (U. S.) could never (have) overtaken" the enemy before he reached the safety of waters protected by his own planes and submarines operating from Okinawa and Japanese bases.

If the proof of the pudding is in the eating thereof, then full vindication for American tactics lies in the fact that the results undoubtedly made it possible for MacArthur to step up his timetable for invading the Philippines, and considerably hastened victory by virtually decimating the Japanese naval air forces and by sinking twenty and damaging as many more of the enemy fleet during the operation.

Admiral Ozawa was a shrewd antagonist. He possibly might have served his country's purpose to better advantage if he had not stuck so assiduously to Tokyo-made plans and had instead committed his battle line and carrier divisions against MacArthur's forces and the U. S. Seventh Fleet employed in the invasion of western New Guinea. Ozawa, however, inflexibly followed the overall strategy of "Operation A-go." On the other hand, Admiral Spruance, while not ignoring his greater responsibility for the successful capture of the Marianas, demonstrated his "power of decision and coolness in action" to vary overall strategy sufficiently to divert most of his forces from the Marianas and go after the enemy.

The book is not outstanding from a literary standpoint, nor is it intended to merit such distinction. The author achieves superior narrative form by the use of naval phraseology, which provides a realism that could not otherwise be obtained. Whether the reader is a serious student of history or merely likes history related in an intimate manner, he will find *New Guinea and the Marianas* as full of action literally as its newsreel counterpart is visually.

HARRY S. HUDSON

WATCH IN THE NIGHT. By Edilberto K. Tiempo. Archipelago Publishing House, Manila. 1953. Pp. 212. P8.50.

This is a war story, accepted for the Ph. D. degree by an American university (Iowa) where apparently a novel may be presented in lieu of a doctoral dissertation. To evaluate it properly, it should be approached from two angles: as a novel, it must be tested by literary standards; as a historical novel, it must stand the test of historical truth.

Artistically, the work has much to commend it. Mr. Tiempo has the story-teller's gift, and many an episode is told with vividness and realism. He also has that adjunct to the story-teller's art, the gift of description—exact, leisurely