

David W Fletcher, January 2001

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HARRY A. GAILEY'S *THE WAR IN THE PACIFIC*
FROM PEARL HARBOR TO TOKYO BAY

In a compact overview of World War II in the Pacific, Harry A. Gailey methodically retells the story of the forty-five month conflict between Japan and the United States from the “day of infamy” at Pearl Harbor to the unconditional surrender of the Japanese at Tokyo Bay.¹ Gailey gives a detailed narration of all major and many minor campaigns from 7 December 1941 through the summer of 1945. The author blends together nicely the variant perspectives of both American and Japanese military and political leaders for each of the battles. This synthesis results in a readable work that is informative, stimulating, and quite balanced, albeit a work that is filled with technical military terminology and acronyms. Gailey superbly never loses sight of the truth that diplomatic posturing and military structuring always precede the battle, and he accomplishes this for all levels of each particular campaign. By this, he shows that he masters well the craft of military history.

In the decades that have followed World War II, many biographers, chroniclers, and historians have left an important heritage of stories and their interpretation—both official and unofficial—about the war in the Pacific. But Gailey believes that “military historiography since the war reflects the prewar bias of U.S. policy by focusing on events in Europe. This is not to imply that the Pacific war has been completely overlooked . . . [but] many deadly campaigns

¹*The War in the Pacific from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995), 534 pages.

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once thought to have been critical have been all but ignored” (p. ix). The author intends to correct this lacunae by omitting entirely the Asian land war—the China-Burma-India theater—and its complex geopolitical problems. This frees him to treat in more detail those battles previously neglected, such as actions in the Solomon Islands, the devastating Peleliu encounter, American and Australian engagements along the lengthy New Guinea coast, and the Allied conquest of the Philippines. In this way, Gailey produces a laudable and comprehensive account of the war that centers solely on the central and southwest Pacific.

War by its very nature can confuse, but Gailey elucidates the action expertly—from Pearl Harbor to Japan’s control of the Pacific, from the Coral Sea to Guadalcanal, across New Guinea, through the Marianas, back to the Philippines, over Iwo Jima and Okinawa, and then to Japan’s defeat after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Such an inclusive history of war in the Pacific is no easy task. The geography of the battlefield, namely, myriad islands each with their own intricate features, is complex, and the network of plans, actions, and counteractions between armies and navies of both Japanese and the Allied nations is complicated. But Gailey rigorously transitions from episode to episode in a logical, coordinated manner. This orderly style keeps the reader interested in the story, and it preserves a sense of clarity for the big picture. True, the author does not relish the melodramatic hype that Marines or air jocks typically tell. Gailey rather gives the serious reader of military history an account that breathes authentic and true.

Gailey offers a worthy addition to surveys about World War II’s Pacific theater, especially since he carves out an important niche that has been largely neglected. His emphasis

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on oriental roots to the conflict, on Japanese military preparations, and significant deliberations of Japanese politicians, military advisers, and commanders, yields a conspicuous balance to the whole. This is not a one-sided war. It is a war among belligerents that harbor varying but legitimate objectives, perspectives, and presuppositions. Another positive highlight comes as a result of Gailey's judicious portrayal of American military and political heroes. Not only does he criticize key leaders fairly, he also applauds them reservedly. Helps for the reader include eighteen maps, fourteen pages of black and white photographs (all commanders), an excellent bibliography (pp. 499-508), and a helpful index (pp. 509-534). This book is highly recommended for all readers who are interested in the World War II Pacific campaigns and American-Japanese relations.