

Vincent P. O'Hara

The US Navy against the Axis:
Surface Combat 1941-45
Naval Institute Press 2007;
hardback, 384 pages, 20 B&W
photos, many tables and maps;
price \$36.95 (UK distributor:
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A follow-on from the author's previous *The German Fleet at War 1939-45* (reviewed in *Warship* 2005), this new book adopts a similar approach to the task of recounting the US Navy's surface operations during the Second World War. O'Hara rightly points out that although the Pacific theatre is mostly associated with the great carrier battles, for a long period, from the autumn of 1942 to the autumn of 1943, the US Navy was down to two fleet carriers and the Imperial Japanese Navy was attempting to rebuild its shattered air groups, so combat devolved onto the surface forces: battleships, cruisers and destroyers. The battle of attrition in the Solomons became the crucible in which the surface warfare doctrines of both navies were tested to destruction. This key theatre is very much at the centre of the book, as the author looks at how doctrine was modified in the light of experience, and in particular at how the tactics employed by the US Navy evolved to take account of radar, which in the early stages did not always confer the anticipated advantages in night fighting.

The first part of the book, which deals with the confused cruiser/destroyer battles around the

Dutch East Indies, provides in effect a 'warm-up' to the main show in the Solomons, while the later part deals with the 'Torch' and Normandy landings, and the battles for Leyte Gulf, by which time the US Navy's material superiority was matched by an increasingly effective doctrine, with disastrous consequences for the elite IJN surface forces thrown into this last desperate battle. The inclusion of Vichy France under the term 'Axis' is debatable – France was never a member and at the time of the landings in North Africa was strictly a neutral country – but this is a criticism of the 'catch-all' title not the coverage; the French surface forces at Casablanca actively opposed the landings and provided a fierce test for the US naval forces present.

As in the author's book on the *Kriegsmarine* each of the battles recounted here is accompanied by a table giving the composition and organisation of the forces present and data for each ship, and most are accompanied by clear maps drawn by the author to a consistent style and format. At the end of each account there is a brief analysis of failures and of lessons learned, and this is clear and balanced and mercifully free of the polemic which mars some accounts of the US Navy's actions. The black & white photographs, although not central to the book, are generally well-chosen and give a feel for the ships involved and for the nature of the conflict.

John Jordan