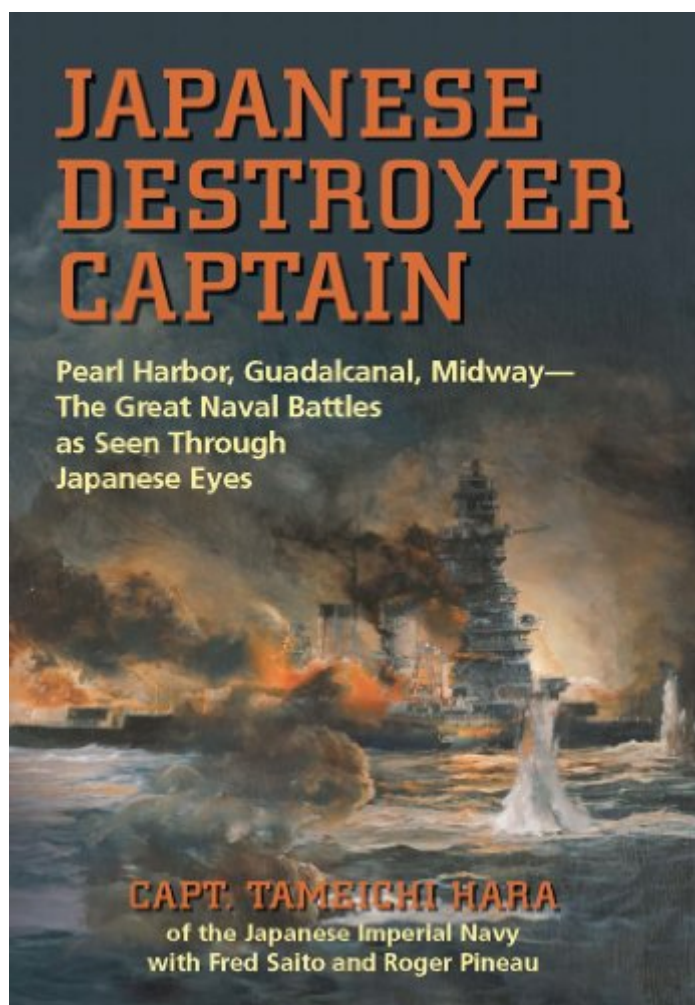


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Japanese Destroyer Captain



Synopsis

This highly regarded war memoir was a best seller in both Japan and the United States during the 1960s and has long been treasured by historians for its insights into the Japanese side of the surface war in the Pacific. The author was a survivor of more than one hundred sorties against the Allies and was known throughout Japan as the Unsinkable Captain. A hero to his countrymen, Capt. Hara exemplified the best in Japanese surface commanders: highly skilled, hard driving, and aggressive. Moreover, he maintained a code of honor worthy of his samurai grandfather, and, as readers of this book have come to appreciate, he was as free with praise for American courage and resourcefulness as he was critical of himself and his senior commanders.

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Customer Reviews

I first read this book back in the late 1960s. As a history major at the time, I had been studying the naval war with Japan for many years and much about it just did not make sense. Why did the Japanese keep on making so many mistakes? There were not stupid, notwithstanding our own propaganda to that effect. After Captain Hara published his book, historians all over the world were

jumping up and down. At last they had an inside view of how the Japanese military had been structured, how inflexible it had become, how it was strategically commanded not by naval staff, but by the needs of the Army. They also came to understand how in the early battles, the U.S. naval forces had fared so badly. Much of it was because of Captain Hara's torpedo doctrine and the navy's vastly superior long range oxygen driven torpedo. But the army was so focused on its own problems, it did not prepare for the obsolescence of its own equipment and/or the needs of the navy which it relied upon for so much. The Japanese naval high command was also a mess. It did not rely on battle hardened veterans, but rather stuck with its rigid class system and kept on promoting those who never understood the nature of the enemy they faced or the influence technology would have upon its outcome. That Captain Hara was critical of these commanders can only be seen as a very good thing. Many fine Japanese sailors died needlessly because of their errors. Hopefully, today they have eliminated these problems and will not be fighting the last war when the next one is forced upon them. I have recommended this book many times to young people who have shown an interest in the naval war in the Pacific. It is simply the best book to come out of the war, and notwithstanding the many fine military folks who disagree with me, preferring a more patriotic view, it reveals our enemy of the time in fine detail and tells a story of that conflict no one on our side could match. No study of the naval war could be complete without a thorough understanding of Captain Hara's great adventures. If he made mistakes in his depiction of various battles and/or facts, as some here have claimed, those mistakes have been matched many times over by our own battle observers and writers. That is the nature of war and bias. Gerald Lane Summers. See my own books. Mobley's Law, A Mobley Meadows Novel

I first encountered this work thirty-odd years ago while doing some fairly extensive research on the early years of World War II in the South Pacific. My original copy of this book, now in an advanced stage of deterioration, was a paperback, and the work had been out of print for a long time; therefore I was very glad to find this hardback reprint. It's important to remember that the author is a product of a different culture, and within the context of that culture, the product of a different time; inevitably his writing style reflects those differences. Readers who anticipate the smooth style of Robert Leckie, E.B. Sledge, or Samuel Eliot Morison may find Hara's narrative a bit slower, perhaps a little more taxing. Nonetheless, the rewards are worth the extra attention. In 1941 the Imperial Japanese Navy was the queen of the Pacific. The IJN had never lost a battle. Its seamen had been forged in a crucible of exacting, intense, even brutal training, in which the deaths of sailors were considered a regrettable but otherwise inconsequential matter. They were tough, seasoned, highly

motivated, and - on the surface of it at least - contemptuous of death. Moreover, Japan had already been at war for some years, so their ranks included many veterans already blooded. Hara's story as an officer, a leader of such men in the IJN, humanizes the face of the enemy somewhat, provides an alternative script to events we thought we already knew, but does not greatly illuminate the interested Western mind in those matters which have rendered the Eastern mind puzzling to us. This can be a little offputting; you know how we love explanations. But then, this is a combat officer's narrative, so maybe we shouldn't expect much instruction beyond the facts, as he understood them, surrounding combat . . . Hara takes us into the workings of the IJN's command system and strategies. He is unstinting in his criticism of the ineffective policies that wasted time, lives, and materiel and which, in his view, cost Japan the war. He names names and leaves no sacred cow unassailed, up to and even beyond the nearly-never-assailed Isoroku Yamamoto. His descriptions of the counterproductive, steel-rigid behavioral codes that governed conduct among officers in Imperial Japan's military establishment leave us wondering . . . But far from being merely a rant against foolishness and even outright incompetence in high places, his account is rich with first-person battle stories from a perspective a notch or two above the station of the ordinary seaman. Even in his conservative style, these accounts are riveting. Unfortunately personal accounts are famously prone to errors, and Hara commits a couple of his own. I might note as an example his claim that his ship sank the USS Helena (CL50) at the pell mell naval action off Guadalcanal in the wee hours of November 13, 1942. Perhaps we should not judge Hara too harshly in this mistake; this was an intense, confused engagement that Samuel Eliot Morison described as "a vicious, hull-to-hull slugfest, the likes of which have not been seen since the days of sail." (As it happens, my father was manning a 5-inch mount aboard Helena in the battle cited, and I am prepared to assert unequivocally that Helena survived the battle relatively unhurt. She continued to aggravate the Japanese until the Battle of Kula Gulf in July, 1943, where she actually was sunk. I am surprised that Hara's editors allowed such errors to pass without comment.) I might further note that I feel Hara is rather parochial in his perception of certain events. He dismisses the infamous Japanese "Rape of Nanking" as having been over-reported and sensationalized, and - as freely as he castigates the tactical and strategic decisions of the high command - he never suggests that his nation was culpable in its imperialist ambitions or its treatment of other peoples. It seems his regret does not extend beyond the fact that Japan lost the war, and he never bothers himself with ethical questions concerning why they were at war in the first place. Despite these few flaws, however, I have no reservations about recommending this book to those with an interest in the topic. History is a never ending voyage of discovery. Books like this add depth to our perceptions and justify the

journey. Conclusion: For the student of the War in the Pacific, this book is an essential. Even in its drawbacks it provides an example of what our Japanese enemy understood as truth in those days of bitter combat, and how he experienced his war. The casual reader looking for a "rollicking good tale" might find himself frustrated by the unfamiliar pace of the narrative. Those looking deeper will likely find an engrossing, possibly even disturbing, read.

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