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BOOK REVIEWS

Guadalcanal: World War II's fiercest naval campaign

by Adrian Stewart

William Kimber: London; 1985; 190 pp.; ISBN 0-7183-0569-8;

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With Australian soldiers and police engaged in a lengthy peacekeeping operation in the Solomon Islands, it is timely to recall the warfighting that took place there 69 years ago in World War II.

For six months from August 1942 to February 1943, American and Japanese forces fought six major naval battles and many smaller actions near the island of Guadalcanal, in the south-east of the Solomon Island chain, as both sides sought the use of its airbase, Henderson Field, to refuel planes for action in the Pacific. Given the limited range of planes and the ability of planes to identify convoys and/or submarines, the Solomon Islands were a key to the defence of, or an attack upon, Australia.

The six major naval battles were the Battles of: Savo Island (in which the heavy cruiser, HMAS *Canberra* was one of four Allied heavy cruisers sunk); the Eastern Solomons; Cape Esperance; Santa Cruz; Guadalcanal; and Tassafaronga. Four of these major actions were fought in Savo Sound, which lies just to the north of Guadalcanal at the south-eastern end of 'The Slot', the channel running from north-west to south-east between the two main branches of the Solomon chain¹. It was re-christened Ironbottom Sound by the Americans from the numbers of sunken vessels that carpeted the sea bed.

Stewart describes the six main naval battles in detail and includes a short assessment of the performance of the leading admirals and/or generals; the disposition of ships and/or troops; and the armaments of ships, planes and troops. The inadequacies of some leaders, including the absence or inadequacy of battle plans, reconnaissance, air cover, training, *etc.*, are considered. The reader comes to understand how each engagement became a learning experience for combatants from each side. The final chapter describes the aerial ambush mission that killed Admiral I. Yamamoto. The text is well-supported by maps depicting the battles. The 28 photos include those of six ships, three types of planes, senior officers from both sides, and Henderson Field.

I read *Guadalcanal* to better understand the context of the service of my father, a United States Naval Reserve supply officer, who was on the headquarters that ran Henderson Field. It will be of interest to others with similar family histories. I particularly commend this short, very readable book, however, to those who are preparing to deploy to the Solomon Islands.

Priscilla Leece

¹The other two major actions (the East Solomons and Santa Cruz) were fought in the seas to the east of the island chain.