Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway by Anthony Tully

Many consider the Battle of Midway to have turned the tide of the Pacific War. It is without question one of the most famous battles in history. Now, for the first time since Gordon W. Prange’s bestselling Miracle at Midway, Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully offer a new interpretation of this great naval engagement. Unlike previous accounts, Shattered Sword makes extensive use of Japanese primary sources. It also corrects the many errors of Mitsuo Fuchida’s Midway: The Battle That Doomed Japan, an uncritical reliance upon which has tainted every previous Western account. It thus forces a major, potentially controversial reevaluation of the great battle. The authors examine the battle in detail and effortlessly place it within the context of the Imperial Navy’s doctrine and technology. With a foreword by leading WWII naval historian John Lundstrom, Shattered Sword will become an indispensable part of any military buff’s library. Winner of the 2005 John Lyman Book Award for the Best Book in U.S. Naval History and cited by Proceedings as one of its Notable Naval Books for 2005.

My Personal Review:
This piece is essentially a modern analysis of the causes of the Japanese defeat in the great Battle of Midway. It is more an analysis of Japanese defeat than American victory which, while fascinating, only tells part of the story of the greatest naval battle in American history, and one of the great battles of all time.

The main thrust of this work is to refute the common wisdom that a major cause of the Japanese defeat was that American dive bombers hit three Japanese aircraft carriers while these vessels were in the process of loading bombs onto their own dive bombers and torpedo planes on their flight decks. Here, the authors are persuasive. They give detailed accounts which convince the reader that Japanese doctrine would have had the
planes being refit below decks. Further, the authors claim with convincing
evidence that the incessant American attacks throughout the morning kept
the Japanese fleet largely on the defensive, as it tried to augment its
Combat Air Patrol with additional launchings of fighter aircraft. This is a
new perspective on the battle, and this appears to be the major finding of
this book.

Beyond these tactical considerations, the authors further argue that Japan
lost the battle for other more strategic reasons. The authors argue that
Yamamotos Midway strategy lost sight of the principles of Mass and
Objective. The principle of Massing of Forces (Mass) was violated as the
Japanese dropped one aircraft carrier from the battle due to moderate
damage that it suffered at the Battle of Coral Sea (first) and, even more
importantly, diverted one carrier group to support a simultaneous sideshow
in the Aleutians, which diverted a considerable number of planes from the
main battle which was to take place at Midway. These planes could have
been decisive in the great battle that was to occur. Further, the Japanese
lost sight of the principle of the Objective—were they there to defeat the
American fleet or invade Midway and the Aleutians, or both? The
Japanese strategy was a hodgepodge of conflicting objectives, and indeed
the conflict as to whether they should strike Midway or turn to engage the
American fleet that seemed to lurk on their flank plagued the Japanese
fleet at a decisive moment.

By contrast, the Americans, as the authors point out, moved heaven and
earth to put the Yorktown back into the battle, after that carrier was heavily
damaged after the Coral Sea battle. So badly damaged was Yorktown that
the Japanese never dreamed that the US Navy could produce her at the
Midway showdown. As the authors put it, the US Navy simply wanted the
win more desperately than did the Japanese. The Japanese, argue the
authors, where overconfident after years of victories over both Asian and
Western adversaries, and had contempt for their American foe.

I found the authors arguments largely persuasive, but also incomplete.
This book is told almost entirely from the Japanese perspective in that it
focuses mainly on what the Japanese did wrong. It tells the reader much
less about what the US Navy did right. The American victory at Midway
largely turned on the decisions of one man, the great Rear Admiral
Raymond Spruance. Spruances decision to launch early, at long range, to
get in the first blows against the Japanese was decisive, especially if we
apply and accept the authors analysis. Even though, at this early stage of
the war, the American torpedo bombers were not very competent (none of
them struck Japanese targets and they were slaughtered by Japanese
fighters) and the launchings of the coordinated attacks did not come off
well, this early strike that Spruance ordered kept the Japanese on the
defensive after the first Japanese strike against Midway. This set the stage
for the deadly-competent American dive bombers to strike. This is the very
point that the authors make, but this was not due to Japanese
incompetence, but rather to a carefully thought-out strategy by Admiral
Spruance. Spruance then wisely protected the fleet, avoided exposing it, and kept it in position to protect Midway if necessary. He came in for savage insiders criticism even during the battle as well as thereafter. This criticism was incorrect, as history has judged. Unlike the Japanese, Spruance never forgot his objective (protect the fleet, defend Midway), and always applied the principal of Mass as he struck a lethal blow at the heart of the Japanese Navy with everything he had. While the American Navy at the Battle of Midway had not yet shook off all of the peacetime inertia, it executed its well thought-out doctrine against the Japanese under Spruances leadership, and won a great victory. Victory was won by the US Navy at Midway, not lost by the Japanese.

Shattered Sword is an excellent analysis of the Battle of Midway which all readers with an interest in this great battle will want to read. Its main strength is its analysis of the Japanese side and its command of detail in this regard. Recommended

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