“This will be a fight against overwhelming odds from which survival cannot be expected. We will do all the damage we can.”

With these words, Lieutenant Commander Robert W. Copeland addressed the crew of the destroyer escort USS Samuel B. Roberts on the morning of October 25, 1944, off the Philippine Island of Samar. On the horizon loomed the mightiest ships of the Japanese navy, a massive fleet that represented the last hope of a staggering empire. All that stood between it and Douglas MacArthur's vulnerable invasion force were the Roberts and the other small ships of a tiny American flotilla poised to charge into history.

In the tradition of the 1 New York Times bestseller Flags of Our Fathers, James D. Hornfischer paints an unprecedented portrait of the Battle of Samar, a naval engagement unlike any other in U.S. history—and captures with unforgettable intensity the men, the strategies, and the sacrifices that turned certain defeat into a legendary victory.

My Personal Review:
This will be a fight against overwhelming odds from which survival cannot be expected. We will do all the damage we can. - Lieutenant Commander Robert W. Copeland, from the dust jacket.
One of the saddest truths about the turn of the new Millennium is the realization that the veterans of the so-called Greatest Generation, those
who defeated Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, are now rapidly passing into history. As such, it has become even more important that the stories of their heroism and sacrifice be written down for posterity while the heroes themselves are still around to tell them. With his new book, The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors, literary agent and author James D. Hornfischer has documented one such lesser-remembered World War Two tale with a reverence befitting the brave men who fought and died for America's freedom.

The events of the book take place during the Battle of Leyte Gulf, which stands as the largest naval engagement in world history, and was fought between the Japanese and American navies in the vicinity of the Philippines as General Douglas McArthurs forces were invading to take the archipelago back from the Japanese. The Leyte Gulf campaign has been well documented in other books about the Pacific war, so Hornfischer focuses most of his attention on one particular engagement off Samar Island. There, a small task force of American escort carriers and destroyers (the Tin Cans of the title), held off a far superior enemy fleet of battleships and cruisers with a combination of near-suicidal bravery and spectacular seamanship coupled with a healthy dose of sheer good fortune.

Tin Can Sailors is exhaustively researched, which gives the narrative the kind detailed nuance that elevates it above the level of mere reportage into inspired storytelling. Hornfischer sets the stage by introducing the main players, both the ships and the men who sailed on them. He gives an overall view of events leading up to the battle to assist the casual reader in placing it in context, and also presents enough of the Japanese point of view to give an appreciation of how desperate the forces of the Rising Sun were at this stage of the war. Desperate enough, in fact, to risk virtually their entire remaining surface fleet on a gamble, the success of which hinged on their ability to bluff hard-charging American Admiral William F. Bull Halsey. If not for the almost superhuman courage of the Tin Can Sailors, they might well have succeeded and seriously imperiled McArthurs invasion forces.

The battle scenes in the book are particularly well depicted; some of the first hand accounts are every bit as graphically disturbing as, say, the first half-hour of the movie Saving Private Ryan. Such images are absolutely vital to the telling of the story, and the author handles them deftly, never lapsing into sensationalism. Hour-by-hour position maps showing the locations of the ships are helpfully provided to assist the reader along with a generous selection of photographs. The extras make Tin Can Sailors one of the best battle books Ive read in terms of helping the reader see the action as it is taking place. The epilogue contains a list of those who died fighting the battle, and what is immediately striking is that America lost more fighting men in just over three hours in this one small corner of World War Two than it has during the entire nine-plus months of the Iraq war.

Overall, The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors is a first rate work of history that will be enjoyed equally by both military buffs and more casual readers. The book was obviously a labor of love for its author, and he should be saluted for his efforts in writing it.
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