

Nonfiction review: "A Dawn Like Thunder"

Posted by [Les AuCoin, special to The Oregonian](#) March 06, 2009 11:23AM

Categories: [Book Reviews](#), [Books Subject Stories](#), [O! Reviews](#)

With a telling worthy of his award-winning fiction and buttressed by prodigious research, Robert J. Mrazek's "[A Dawn Like Thunder: The True Story of Torpedo Squadron Eight](#)" recounts the story of a single U.S. Navy torpedo squadron whose astonishing bravery and sacrifice helped defeat the Japanese war machine at Midway Island and Guadalcanal, battles that turned the course of World War II in the Pacific and perhaps history itself.

Mrazek also illuminates the decades-long cover-up of the pig-headedness of the ranking U.S. commander at the Battle of Midway, whose self-certainty led to the massacre there of 29 of 30 pilots in U.S. Torpedo Squadron Eight. But for a subsequent miscalculation by the Japanese command, the blunder might have handed the epic victory of Midway to the enemy, forcing a U.S. redeployment from the Atlantic and leaving Great Britain to face Hitler alone in Western Europe.

But with the triumph at Midway -- some six months after Pearl Harbor -- the official cover-up rested on the belief that demoralized America needed to know not about the imbecility of a U.S. flag officer in the heat of combat but, rather, staggering losses inflicted on the vaunted Japan Imperial Navy -- four premier aircraft carriers and one heavy cruiser.

As Mrazek's introduction notes, this is not another didactic tome about Midway and Guadalcanal. It is, rather, "the story about one small group of men from every part of America who fought in both (battles), flying outmoded aircraft that launched unreliable torpedoes against enemy warships."

Drawing on interviews with squadron survivors, family and friends, correspondence and journals -- and the discovery of startling records -- Mrazek takes the reader through the moment-by-moment thoughts, feuds, fears, losses and triumphs of Torpedo Squadron Eight's tragic yet valorous odyssey.

The reader almost smells cordite from Japanese shells in the Americans' nostrils, tastes Guadalcanal's black grit in their mouth, and hears the Klaxons scream another warning of incoming Japanese Zeros. (Portland's William Tunstall, a squadron machinist mate, was one of the author's interviewees.)

Nowhere is Mrazek more graphic than in his account of the squadron's furious four-month struggle at Guadalcanal. The reader follows grounded aviators into foxholes to help U.S. Marines repel swarming enemy shock troops when the Japanese put the crew's last bomber out of action. During lulls in the fighting, the airmen slip under the jungle canopy to assemble flying "Frankensteins" -- attack craft they piece together with usable parts from the squadron's bone yard.

Torpedo Eight's squadron commander flew these makeshift craft with suicidal zeal against ships ferrying in enemy infantry reinforcements. Despite his heroism, the officer's men despised him. On two separate occasions over the months, a crew member had drawn a pistol on him in anger before thinking twice.

Mrazek's exploration of such paradoxes and ambiguities, and the graceful cadence of his unadorned, readable prose seem destined to establish the retired U.S. congressman-turned-novelist as a major figure in historical nonfiction and make "A Dawn Like Thunder" a classic in its field.