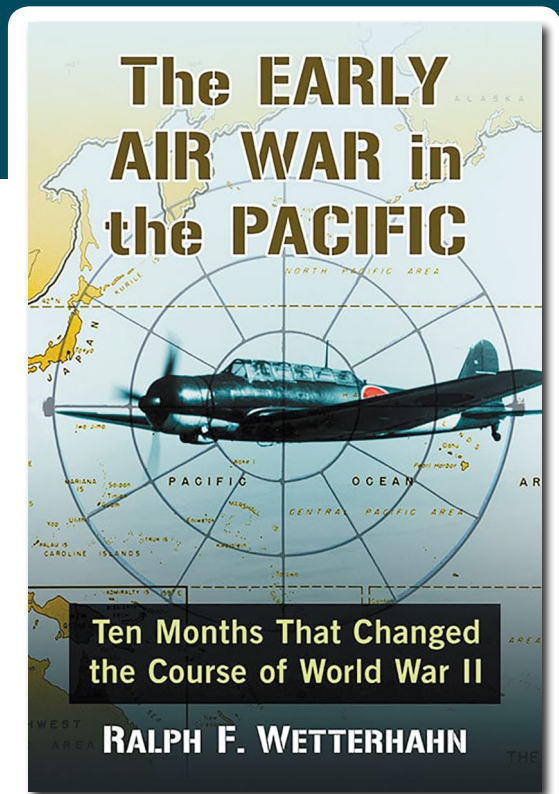


# REVIEW ESSAY

## The Early Air War in the Pacific

### Ten Months That Changed the Course of World War II

Ralph Wetterhahn, McFarland, Jefferson,  
North Carolina, 2019, 319 pages



Lt. Col. Jesse McIntyre III, U.S. Army, Retired

The Allies were on the verge of defeat in the Pacific following the Japanese attacks 7–8 December 1941. The United States was reeling from devastating attacks on Pearl Harbor, the Philippine Islands, and Wake Island. Three days later, a Japanese air attack would sink HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* off the coast of present-day Malaysia. Japan quickly occupied French Indochina, Thailand, the Dutch East Indies, and the Philippine Islands. Over the next ten months, Japan appeared invincible as its empire had increased from 655,000 square miles to approximately 1.6 million square

miles. Former fighter pilot and retired colonel Ralph Wetterhahn offers fresh analysis of that dire situation in *The Early Air War in the Pacific*.

Wetterhahn describes how Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto's love of gambling played into the planning for the attack on Pearl Harbor. Yamamoto believed that Pearl Harbor and Singapore were the only two locations of credible Allied military power in the Pacific, and its forces in the rest of the Pacific would quickly crumble if these two sites were neutralized by the Japanese navy. Attacking Pearl Harbor and Singapore would bring out

the U.S. Navy where it would be destroyed in a decisive battle, much like what happened to the Russian navy at the Battle of Tsushima in 1905.

Wetterhahn chronicles Japanese attacks throughout the Pacific beginning with Pearl Harbor. He states the war in the Pacific was an aviation war and credits Japan's air superiority for its initial success in defeating Allied forces. Obsolete Allied aircraft piloted by combat-inexperienced pilots were no match against the nimble Japanese A6M Zeros piloted by battle-hardened pilots. Japan used army and navy air assets to neutralize Allied air assets, target naval forces, and support Japanese ground forces. But Wetterhahn correctly opines that the Japanese missed an opportunity to exploit anticolonial feelings of local populaces who initially viewed the Japanese as liberators. Japanese racism toward other Asian populations would be quickly reflected in the brutal excesses that occurred in Malaya, the Philippines, and China.

Wetterhahn pulls no punches in his criticism of Gen. Douglas MacArthur's defense of the Philippines. MacArthur received pay as major general from the United States as well as \$33,000 from the Philippines to serve as military adviser to the Commonwealth. MacArthur was warned by Gen. Dwight Eisenhower for falsely reporting on the progress he was making on creation of a Philippine army. He continued the scheme, however, while failing to prepare Philippine military for the war that was developing around the globe. MacArthur considered the Philippine Islands a prime target and placed all units on alert on 15 November. He received an additional warning from Gen. George Marshall on 27 November that war was imminent, but MacArthur made no comprehensive preparations to defend the Philippines. He would learn at 0345 on 8 December that Pearl Harbor had been attacked but again failed to take action to prepare for a similar Japanese strike. Attacking Japanese pilots could not believe their luck when they attacked Clark Air Field on Luzon Island at 1245 and found no American resistance—some sixty bombers and fighters were neatly parked along the airfield.

Wetterhahn is equally critical of President Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt made numerous promises that the United States was coming to the Philippines's defense; however, these were outright lies. On 28 December, Philippine President Manuel Quezon received a cable from Roosevelt that read, "I can assure you that every

vessel available is bearing ... the strength that will eventually crush the enemy and liberate your native land."<sup>1</sup> But there were no ships with supplies and reinforcements moving toward the Philippines. The United States focused on its Europe First Strategy, sending supplies to Russia and the United Kingdom. Equally troubling was Roosevelt's wording of "liberate your native land," giving Quezon and MacArthur the impression that Roosevelt did not possess situational awareness of events taking place in the Philippines. In the first week of February, when Roosevelt finally informed MacArthur that no aid was forthcoming, Quezon reacted furiously, requesting Philippine independence and demanding the withdrawal of all American and Japanese forces in the Philippines.

In contrast to his scathing assessments of MacArthur and Roosevelt, Wetterhahn captures several bright spots during those dark months for the Allies in the Pacific. For example, Marines defending Wake Island put up a spirited defense that included thwarting a Japanese landing and the first sinking of a Japanese warship in World War II. A handful of Army aviators, naval ships, and ground forces continued to fight to the end. In addition, the U.S. Navy launched two carrier task forces to conduct raids in the Marshall and Gilbert Islands. These raids brought some badly needed good news for the American public while serving warning to Japan that America was still in the fight. Furthermore, a joint Australian-American naval force checked a major Japanese operation designed to occupy Port Moresby in New Guinea and Tulagi in the Solomon Islands. Wetterhahn also describes the eight seconds at Midway when a handful of Navy aviators forever ended Japanese hopes for victory in the Pacific.

Wetterhahn's research indicates Japan's quick early victories resulted in a

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# Military Review

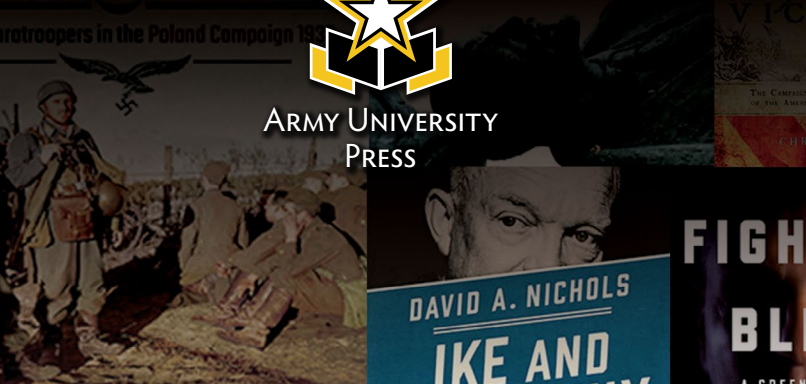
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victory disease—complacency—that contributed to Japan’s eventual defeat in the war. The nimble Japanese A6M Zero, which was superior to Allied fighters at the beginning of World War II, had flaws that were never rectified. Radio static caused by spark plug ignition in the Zero engine was never corrected. Zero pilots were forced to communicate with hand signals, which became problematic when Allied fighters achieved parity. The Zero also lacked armor plating and self-sealing fuel tanks. Moreover, the Japanese navy lacked adequate shipboard radio equipment. Wetterhahn attributes Japan’s eventual failure to aircrews and the Japanese navy for not demanding improvements to these deficiencies. Contrast this with the Allies who continually applied all their lessons learned toward improving their doctrine and equipment.

Of great interest, Wetterhahn details an extraordinary dogfight between Japanese ace Saburo Sakai and American pilot Pug Southerland over Guadalcanal and describes an expedition to the Philippines where U.S. Army Lt. Earl Stone engaged Japanese Sgt. Toshisada Kurosawa over Bataan. Readers will find the latter a heartwarming story where a man fulfills a promise to bring a brother home.

A strength of *The Early Air War in the Pacific* is Wetterhahn’s experience as a combat fighter pilot, from which he draws to give the reader the feel of aerial combat. Wetterhahn’s research is extensive, reflecting numerous primary and secondary sources that include both Allied and Japanese perspectives, unit histories, personal letters and diaries, interviews with participants, and media reports. *The Early Air War in the Pacific* is highly recommended for naval aviators and World War II enthusiasts, as well as those seeking a casual weekend read. ■

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### Note

1. Ralph F. Wetterhahn, *The Early Air War in the Pacific: Ten Months That Changes the Course of World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2019), 114.