

# Twilight of the Gods

reviewed by Col Eric L. Chase, USMCR(Ret)

The final volume of Ian W. Toll's Pacific War trilogy, *Twilight of the Gods: War in the Western Pacific, 1944–1945*, will captivate military history experts, World War II aficionados, and those who savor brilliantly spun war histories. The completed trilogy places Toll as the most authoritative, accessible, and thoroughly readable historian of what was, chiefly, America's war with Japan. In scope, time-frame, and style, it compares with Pulitzer winner Rick Atkinson's *The Liberation Trilogy*—three volumes spanning the war from North Africa to the Mediterranean and Europe.

Toll's opening note in *Twilight* explains how this concluding effort extended far beyond his expectation after completion of the second volume: *The Conquering Tide: War in the Pacific Islands, 1942–1944* (2015), which followed his first volume, *Pacific Crucible: War at Sea in the Pacific, 1941–1942* (2011). Twice delayed by access to ever-expanding new research and detail, he says,

[t]he war got very large in late 1944 and 1945 ... and I found that I could not do justice to the story without giving it the additional time and space it seemed to need.

Actually, readers may yearn for more coverage of land and sea battles, but Toll's mission was not to supersede the many exhaustive histories of specific engagements.

Although it is the longest of the three volumes, *Twilight* spans fewer months than either of the first two. The main action spans mid-1944 to the sudden, abrupt end with the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima

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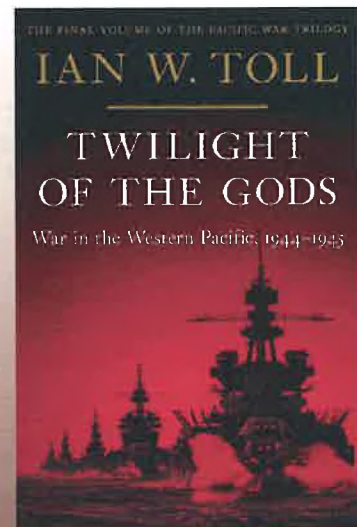
and Nagasaki (6 and 9 August 1945) and the formal surrender aboard the USS *Missouri* on 2 September 1945. Worth the wait, Toll's trilogy now must rank first on any professional reading list for the Pacific War as a whole.

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Despite the horrific destruction wrought by the sudden attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, America's industrial and military might left little doubt about the eventual outcome. Beyond the blow to the Pacific fleet that day, however, there followed more initial setbacks for the United States. Gradually though, America's early confidence was borne out. By mid-1944, Allied victory was just a question of time—albeit a painful and bloody time. The Japanese were still



TWILIGHT OF THE GODS: War in the Western Pacific, 1944–1945. By Ian Toll. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020. ISBN: 978-0393080650, 926 pp.

not about to surrender in 1944, even though U.S. airpower, naval strength, manpower, and other advantages had advanced so far beyond enemy capabilities that any Japanese ship sent to sea without air coverage became a suicide mission. The advent of new American bombers (especially the B-29 as of June 1944) and new fighters, limitless recruits and hundreds of war vessels, along with a deteriorated Japanese capability to wage war assured American primacy on land, in the air, and at sea throughout the final year of conflict in the Pacific. Adding to Japan's woes were the German surrender in May 1945 and the Soviet commitment to turn its guns against Japan.

Toll adroitly navigates through complex issues and events, and he writes with clarity, precision, and passion. Battle scenes will leave readers breathless. From chapter to chapter, the narrative moves mostly chronologically from place to place, including not only land and sea combat arenas in the Pacific but also American and Japanese home venues and perspec-

tives. The shifting focus often zeroes in upon individual actors, broad war strategies and narrow tactics of the belligerents, mistakes made, and successes achieved—always at an exacting pace and at a steep price of men, ships, and aircraft.

Well-painted vignettes of homefronts in the United States and Japan help illustrate how and why each side made its grand strategy choices. Before the period covered by *Twilight*, Japan's war had already foundered into hopelessness. Nevertheless, its leaders habitually lied to warfighting personnel, to the public, and to each other about invented victories and future prospects. A compliant, government-controlled media followed suit and fed a constant flow of fiction to the citizenry. Japan's imperial military leadership persisted beyond reason, and its people endured hardship and sacrifice to the point of senselessness.

American decision makers, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his military and civilian advisors, heatedly debated overall strategies and priorities—amongst themselves and with their theater commanders. In *Twilight's* first chapter, Toll describes the "July 1944 summit in Hawaii," attended by Roosevelt, MacArthur, Admiral Chester Nimitz, and the flag officers who were the president's chief war advisors in Washington.

Throughout the conference, options both big and small seemed almost unlimited, and decisions frequently were arbitrary. America's military and civilian leaders sometimes differed mightily in America's prosecution of the Pacific War. In particular, GEN Douglas MacArthur obsessed over his promised "return" to the Philippines, and he vigorously pressed his points of view—dismissing contrary opinions and those who proffered them. For all the years of World War II, he steamed about the "Europe First" policy embraced by Roosevelt and made his resentment known to Washington.

Unlike Europe, where GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower became the Supreme Allied Commander, the Pacific War's American split military leadership sowed command discord.

MacArthur presided over the Southwest Pacific Area from his Australian headquarters after his February 1942 rescue from besieged Corregidor, while Nimitz ran the Pacific Fleet from his Pearl Harbor headquarters and later from Guam. These two 4-then-5-star officers offer stark contrasts in style, leadership, personality, and strategic thinking. They could not have been more dissimilar.

Fierce internal debates, occasionally vicious, over operational strategy sometimes led to Washington's intervention. Even then, bitterness could simmer—especially when MacArthur

ern island of Luzon? Would [Admiral] Ernest King win his case for seizing Formosa? Should the Americans land on the coast of mainland China—and if so, would that lead to a wider direct involvement of U.S. forces in the Sino-Japanese war? More broadly, what was to be the endgame against Japan? Could Japan be persuaded to accept terms of surrender prior to a bloody invasion? What role might Hirohito, the *Showa* emperor, play in the war's final act? These were complicated and immensely important decisions, and they could not be postponed indefinitely. Nor could the presidential election calendar be moved; come hell

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did not get his way. From the beginning, MacArthur emerges as a man of both towering ability and accomplishment, and as a self-absorbed, dishonest self-promoter. His historical connection with the Philippines clouded and drove his judgment. His father had been Governor General of the Philippines, and MacArthur followed in his father's footsteps when he became Field Marshal of the Philippine Army. Before coming off his retirement from the Army and back to a command assignment, he accepted a payment of \$500,000 from the Philippine government—a present day equivalent of \$8 million. When Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had worked under MacArthur, was also offered a (lesser) payment, he refused it.

*Twilight's* long prologue introduces some of the most pressing political and military tensions of the final months of World War II in the Pacific. Toll establishes:

Fundamental questions of grand strategy remained unresolved in the Pacific. Would MacArthur be given the green light to liberate all of the Philippines, including the main north-

or high water, the voters would go to the polls on the first Tuesday in November. Inevitably, the big strategic issues looming in the Pacific would be decided in a political season—and they would be viewed through the prism of politics, by contemporaries at the time and by historians ever since.

As in the first two volumes covering 1941 to mid-1944, Toll details in *Twilight* American preparations for and anticipation of the many naval engagements and island battles that fill the narrative from mid-1944 to the end. Among others, these include Leyte Gulf and Leyte (the island), Luzon, Manila, Formosa, Peleliu, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. In the "island hopping" strategy, many islands were "bypassed," leaving Japanese occupiers to fester without any fight.

On land and at sea, Toll rivets readers with powerful combat scenes. With the suffocating nature of fighting in the tropics, the author's compelling descriptions personify endless danger, terror, and dread amidst a backdrop of heat, rain, and disease. Hand-to-hand combat, including bayonet and knife fighting, became nightly apprehen-

sions and occurrences as Japanese infiltrated Marines' lines or threatened to do so. The amphibious operations and island warfare that shaped the fates of Marines and their Japanese foes were especially fierce, challenging, and dangerous. Toll's portrayal of Marines on Peleliu explains why so many Pacific war combatants suffered from mental fatigue, a precursor of what is now diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):

Marines who had fought on multiple Pacific island battlefields agreed that Peleliu was the worst. The pitiless equatorial sun beat down on a lifeless moonscape of ivory-colored coral rock, and temperatures routinely surpassed 110 degrees. After three days on the line, the men looked like wraiths: lips blistered, hair matted, coral dust caked on unshaven faces. Sweat ran into their eyes, which already ached from the glare of the sun. The acrid smell and biting taste of cordite stung their noses and throats. Their hands were raw and abraded from crawling on the rocks. No one could escape the all-pervading stench of putrefying bodies, rotting rations, and their own excrement. Clouds of large greenish-blue flies fed off the unburied dead and tormented the living. Sudden torrential rainstorms came in the late afternoon, and sometimes at night. There was no escape from the relentless artillery and mortar barrages. Even among those who were not directly injured by the blasts, the accumulating concussions sapped their strength and spirit. At times the roar and thud of artillery continued from dusk to dawn, making it difficult to get a wink of sleep—but a man who was exhausted enough could sleep even under the muzzles of a 155mm howitzer, which made a sound ... "commensurate to having a subway tunnel running between your ears." When the guns paused, the marines could hear wounded and dying Japanese crying out in the night. Often they cried out for their mothers, as did dying men of all races.

More than most retrospectives on the Pacific War, *Twilight* focuses on the Japanese kamikaze phenomenon, which expanded in 1945 into a central strategic theme in Japan's planning

and operations as its hopes for any positive end fell apart. After the Battle of Midway, 4–7 June 1942, almost no one saw any likelihood of a Japanese victory. Nevertheless, although often at each other's throats, the Imperial Army and Navy fought on with grit, determination, and feigned optimism. Suicide missions became prominent in the war's last year. Toll wrestles with the question of how a nation could justify continued bloodletting in such hopeless circumstances—sacrificing thousands of young lives, with no prospect of a favorable outcome. He rationalizes the kamikaze spirit, as wild and sacrificial as it was, as follows:

For the nine remaining months of war to come, this was to be Japan's guiding strategic vision: to display to the Americans the full force and fury of their Yamato spirit. A nation willing to turn its young men into guided missiles was a nation that would fight to the last man, woman, and child—and a nation willing to fight on such terms could not be conquered. If the Japanese raised the stakes high enough, the Americans would flinch. Their leaders, beholden to American voters, lacked the stomach to fight to the point of civilizational annihilation. Perhaps the Pacific War was already lost; in private councils, among themselves, the junta's leaders were increasingly willing to admit it. But there was a difference between defeat and surrender, between losing an overseas empire and seeing the homeland overrun by a barbarian army. The man-guided missiles were never a realistic bid for victory, but rather a talisman to ward off the horror of total defeat. Even if the official propaganda would not yet admit it, the battle for the sacred islands of Japan had already begun, and the kamikazes were its first line of defense.

Thousands of inexperienced Japanese pilots trained briefly for one-way suicide missions to crash into American ships. Most fliers never made it to their target, but those that did took huge tolls. Kamikaze missions sank or disabled numerous ships and killed thousands of Sailors. Nor was the tactic limited to airplanes. Boats and individual divers targeted warships as well. For American naval vessels in

support of the Okinawa campaign (26 March–2 July 1945), the kamikaze threat was front and center, night and day, with no abatement in the reality of the danger to American men and ships.

For naval personnel at sea and for combatants ashore, Okinawa exacted the highest casualty rate of all the islands. The civilian population, too, was devastated. As with Peleliu and Iwo Jima, Japanese commands were now more adept at defending and killing than they had been in the earlier era of suicidal, wasteful *bonsai* charges and defenses against amphibious forces as they landed. Well-entrenched units, underground and in caves, imposed significant prices in blood from Marines and soldiers for every yard of island gained. The time to pacify Iwo Jima and then Okinawa took considerably longer than any U.S. planners foresaw.

Japanese planning left no doubt: Had there been post-Okinawan U.S. invasions into the Japanese homeland, kamikaze missions were to become primary weapons in Japanese strategic thinking. By then, its offensive combat operations and options were virtually nil. While American industry provided endless firepower in aircraft, warships and manpower, Japan's fighting capability had disintegrated across the spectrum.

Thus, as American commanders prepared for the presumed inevitable landings on Japan's mainland, casualty estimates for friendly forces were horrific. Planning forecasts of civilian and enemy casualties were in the *millions*. The Japanese continued a stated policy of self-destructive bravado, saying they would rather sacrifice tens of millions of their people than surrender. The Pacific War, it appeared, would perhaps continue into 1946, 1947, or even beyond.

Seen in these perspectives, new President Harry S. Truman's decision to deliver the first atomic bomb on 6 August 1945 was not surprising. The development and making of the weapon (the Manhattan Project) was a highly secretive years-long venture, and even President Truman knew lit-

tle about it before Roosevelt's passing on 12 April 1945. Truman anguished over the casualty counts on Iwo and Okinawa. He faced a realistic prospect of 1,000,000 U.S. casualties in taking and occupying mainland Japan.

In 1945, hundreds of U.S. Army Air Force bombing runs using conventional bombs against Japanese cities had exacted, through fire storms, a toll in people and mostly wooden structures that greatly exceeded the monumental destruction and numbers of deaths (mostly civilian) caused by the atomic bombs dropped on Hi-

and Admiral William "Bull" Halsey, characterizing both men, in spite of their formidable strengths, as vain, shallow, self-absorbed, and egocentric—sometimes to the detriment of their missions and the men they led. MacArthur was a "confabulator," says Toll, and he marshalls proof of the general's habitual dishonesty and self-promotion. Both MacArthur and Halsey ascended to five-star rank in December 1944, along with the other six to reach that rank in World War II (Gens George Marshall, Eisenhower, and, Henry "Hap" Arnold, and Admi-

monstrably faulty decisions of both MacArthur and Halsey would have compelled their relief. In MacArthur's case, such a fate did await him in 1951 during the Korean War, long after World War II, when Truman relieved him for insubordination.

*Twilight* is a worthy and commendable finish to Toll's magisterial three volume Pacific War treatise. He draws plentifully from Samuel Eliott Morrison's incomparable 15-volume *History of the United States' Naval Operations in World War II*. Morrison's classic work, however, is a hard slog, not just because of its length but also because of a scope that spans across the Atlantic to North Africa, the Mediterranean, and Europe. Moreover, decades after the publication of Morrison's final volumes, innumerable new facts have come to light, and Toll's rendering is fully as fresh as it is authoritative. Pacific War sources abound, and Toll is generous in appropriately weaving a few citations from others into the narrative along with his own graceful and captivating writing. For example, in sections covering Peleliu and Okinawa, he quotes liberally from Marine Eugene Sledge's classic *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*.

*Twilight* serves as a compendium of lessons in leadership—especially for military leadership but also for other endeavors. MacArthur and Halsey were certainly men of proven talent, personal courage, and strategic sense. Yet, in innumerable instances, their personal failings dominated them, unleashing unnecessary and untold harm. Every American war college and every university leadership program should include Toll's Pacific War trilogy as an indispensable platform to illustrate and instill the need for, and advantage of, humility and perspective in high leadership.




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roshima and Nagasaki. As Toll relates in the waning pages of *Twilight*, there was significant Japanese military opposition to surrendering after the Hiroshima devastation. Such resistance continued *even after* the Nagasaki detonation three days later.

For many wearing the Japanese uniform at the highest levels, death was infinitely preferable to the humiliating dishonor of capitulation. It took an unprecedented intervention by Emperor Hirohito to overcome the resistance against yielding to the Allied demands for unconditional surrender delineated in the Potsdam Declaration of 26 July 1945. Even after Hirohito's announcement on 15 August, some holdouts tried to resist the surrender decision. The only "concession" was to allow the Imperial house to survive.

More so than in volumes I and II, throughout *Twilight*, Toll renders his own opinions on tactics and strategy, and especially on the conduct of operational leaders. He assesses personal and leadership fallibilities of major commanders of both American and Japanese forces. Most prominently, however, he lambastes MacArthur

and Admiral William D. Leahy, Ernest King, and Chester Nimitz). GEN Omar Bradley received his fifth star years later in 1950.

In volume I, Toll had already described briefly the disastrous lack of preparation and response by MacArthur's forces at Clark Field in the Philippines where, mere hours after the 7 December 1941 air attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese nearly wiped out a huge parked U.S. air contingent. In *Twilight*, Toll revisits that catastrophe and seems convinced that MacArthur could, and should, have been relieved at that time. "Although the truth would not come out until years later, MacArthur's conduct on the first day of the war had been at least as culpable as that of [Admiral Husband E.] Kimmel and [General Walter C.] Short," who were in command positions on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Both Kimmel and Short were "reduced in rank, forced to retire, and run through a gauntlet of nine largely redundant investigations." Toll establishes a running theme, suggesting that, but for their hugely popular public personas, the flaws and de-