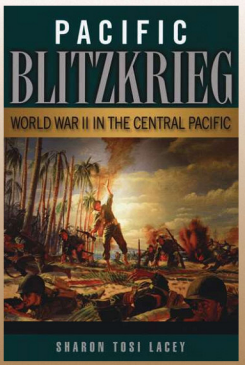
A Pacific War Primer
(Bill) Gordon, John W
Marine Corps Gazette; Apr 2015; 99, 4; Marine Corps Gazette & Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines
pg. 84

A Pacific War Primer

reviewed by Dr. John W. (Bill) Gordon

>Dr. Gordon is a professor at Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University and a retired Colonel in the Marine Corps Reserve. He served in Vietnam and was the CO of 3/24.



PACIFIC BLITZKRIEG: World War II in the Central Pacific. By Sharon Tosi Lacey. University of North Texas Press, Denton, Texas, 2013, ISBN 9781574415254, 336 pp., $27.95. (Member $25.15) Available at http://amzn.to/1DZGvfg.

A decade ago, Marine Corps University conducted a staff ride of Pacific Island battlefields. Sharon Tosi Lacey's new book, *Pacific Blitzkrieg: World War II in the Central Pacific* could have served as a guide for that event. Because of its well-organized chapters—broken down into accessible, clearly laid out sections covering force structure, levels of unit preparation, significant command and control issues, and key leader decisions for battles from Guadalcanal to Okinawa—and a finely-honed closing argument, it would have been excellent preparation for the students on the staff ride. The closing argument focuses on a question perhaps likely always to be raised by some about the war in the Pacific: did bitter, cult-of-personality driven, Army-Marine Corps rivalries prevail throughout, or did the two services overcome challenges to work together and achieve victory in some of the most difficult fighting of the war?

Certainly Lacey is not afraid to take on tough issues, such as "Smith versus Smith"—the relief of Army Major General Ralph Smith by Marine Corps Lieutenant General Holland M. Smith during the fighting for Saipan. This wasn't just controversy or squabble, but rather created a considerable firestorm between the two services and extended into the passage of the National Security Act of 1947. Lacey is an active-duty Army officer, a graduate of West Point, and received her doctorate from the University of Leeds in England. Not only is her study "a good piece of gear" for a staff ride, it is a good read—the author presents findings in a fresh, engaging style that draws upon a wealth of primary sources, many previously untapped.

As to "blitzkrieg" in the title, Lacey uses it in the general sense that came in with World War II: high-speed, high-mobility maneuver to bring combined arms forces—air and ground—against critical points to shatter an enemy. In the vast Pacific, the campaign was an island-hopping maneuver against critical points. Because of the scant geographic density of the Pacific islands and the manifest fury of the two sides, the battles, once joined, resolved themselves into conclusion less by maneuver than by firepower and attrition.

The technology is greatly changed, but the World War II experience still stands as a great laboratory for significant issues in warfighting from the sea. A particular value of Lacey's work is to bring additional focus to such venerable and enduring works as Isley and Crowl's *The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War* (Princeton University Press, 1951). She picks up the story at Guadalcanal, a no-choice, imperative effort to prevent the Japanese from completing an airfield to cut sea traffic from America to Australia. Absent a clear model, Army Air Force (AAF), Army, Marine Corps, and Navy commanders were able, by August 1942, to sort out a command structure; carve up the air, sea, and ground spaces; and create a task organization from disparate forces. Lacey shows how key questions remained, and how the Gilbert and Marshall Islands campaign, which commenced the Central Pacific effort, brought American forces closer to Japan.

This brings us to June 1944 and "Smith versus Smith." Readers will be well-versed on the situation: how Marine Corps Lieutenant General Holland M. Smith—convinced that the 27th Regimental Combat Team was moving too slowly and thus endangering his two Marine divisions—relieved Army Major General Ralph Smith. Rather than try to re-litigate Smith versus Smith, Lacey introduces detailed assessments of the various units' levels of training and readiness, along with an array of combat stats—numbers of casualties sustained, for example—relating to all three divisions involved. The author pulls no punches in her carefully drawn portraits of the two generals: the Marine Corps'

Smith—an unmatched theorist and a zealous partisan of amphibious warfare; and the Army's Smith—a well-regarded solid performer, but in command of a unit that (among other problems) never got to pass through the rigorous preparation that Geoffrey Perret, in *There's a War to Be Won: The United States Army in World War II* (Ballantine Books, 2011), describes as General Lesley J. McNair's "division-building machine."

But as Lacey makes clear, the fiery "Howling Mad" Smith (USMC) was far from the only "personality" to be encountered in the Pacific war. Just offshore was Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, Commander, Amphibious Task Force; and, watching from Hawaii, the Army's Lieutenant General Robert C. Richardson, commanding the U.S. Army, Pacific; and his boss, the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. Meanwhile, continuing his Southwest Pacific Drive to the Philippines was Richardson's West Point classmate, General Douglas MacArthur, certain to be the Army's pick to command the invasion of Japan itself.

Richardson was furious over the dismissal of Major General Smith and he was far from alone. The saving grace, as Lacey argues, was the careful diplomacy of Admiral William D. Leahy, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's military assistant and first chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was Leahy who steered a way through the Smith versus Smith rocks and shoals, finding a commander esteemed by Marines and Army alike: Lieutenant General Simon B. Buckner, USA. When Buckner subsequently died in the Battle of Okinawa, he was succeeded in command by Marine Corps Major General Roy E. Geiger—the first Marine to command a field army. Still, there were limits to the magic. The Battle of Okinawa nearly done and Japan presumably the next stop, Geiger was replaced by the Army's General Joseph W. Stilwell, recently recalled from the China/Burma/India theater for his inability to get along with the British, the Chinese, and the old Flying Tiger himself, the AAF's General Claire Lee Chennault.

Lacey goes beyond stereotypes to look instead at how solutions were worked out for tough problems. One of these was the fundamental issue of who should control landing forces once they were ashore. Marines will recall how the very energetic, very intense Admiral Turner tried—at the height of the fighting for Guadalcanal—to meddle with Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift's 1st Marine Division rifle company dispositions. The solution eventually provided that, at a moment judged appropriate, control would shift from the Navy offshore to the Marine commander of the landing force, with any disagreement arising to be submitted to the mutual commander next up the chain. Solidified as doctrine, this Navy-Marine Corps co-equal relationship made possible levels of flexibility essential as the offensive pressed on to more complex objectives, ones comprising clusters of atolls or larger islands.

Considered more broadly, World War II was the first war in which high-intensity naval warfare could be waged in any quadrant of the ocean, even the enormous reaches of the Pacific. In the rich innovative period between the two world wars, the Navy and the Marine Corps had fused new ideas about weapons and techniques into workable organizational concepts, with the result that it became possible to project sea power by forces of aircraft carriers and by the amphibious assault. The latter breakthrough development by the Marine Corps so contributed to Allied success in both the European and Pacific theaters that British soldier and theorist Major General J.F.C. Fuller called it "the most far reaching tactical innovation" of the war. It was the product of three catalytic commandants: John A. Lejeune, John H. Russell, and Thomas Holcomb.

Lacey's thesis is that cooperation between the Marines and the Army was essential to achieving victory. The Marine Corps' role in World War II brought to it a significance in the overall structure of American defense that it had never known before—and would have to fight to reassert again in the future. In this time of "Pivot to the Pacific" and "return to our amphibious roots," you can read *Pacific Blitzkrieg* with profit. As you think about the content and context of *Expeditionary Force 21*, Lacey's work is an essential addition to your professional bookshelves, one to join any of the classics of the Pacific war. And again, it's a good read.

USMC