



Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941

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One of the great spectacles of modern naval history is the Imperial Japanese Navy's instrumental role in Japan's rise from an isolationist feudal kingdom to a potent military empire stridently confronting, in 1941, the world's most powerful nation. Years of painstaking research and analysis of previously untapped Japanese-language resources have produced this remarkable history of the navy's dizzying development, tactical triumphs, and humiliating defeat. Unrivalled in its breadth of coverage and attention to detail, this important new study explores the foreign and indigenous influences on the navy's thinking about naval warfare and how to plan for it. Focusing primarily on the much-neglected period between the world wars, David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie, two widely esteemed historians, persuasively explain how the Japanese failed to prepare properly for the war in the Pacific despite an arguable advantage in capability.

Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941 **Details**

Date : Published January 1st 1997 by Naval Institute Press

ISBN : 9780870211928

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Format : Hardcover 661 pages

Genre : History, Cultural, Japan, Military, Military History, Nonfiction, Japanese History, War, World War II, Military Fiction

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From Reader Review *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941* for online ebook

Mark says

When it comes to history books, there are good ones and there are great ones. And then there are a few that are truly groundbreaking in their ability to take a subject that has been studied before and address it with such insight that it changes fundamentally the way we think about it. This is one of those books. For in describing the development of the Imperial Japanese Navy from the late 19th century to the attack on Pearl Harbor David Evans and Mark Peattie offers readers a revolutionary look at the thinking and planning that defined the shape of the Pacific War (as the war against the United States and the European imperial powers is called in Japan) before its first shot was ever fired.

Perhaps one of the most surprising things about the Imperial Japanese Navy is how relatively late it was established, for in spite of being an island nation Japan had no naval arm. This changed after the Meiji Restoration, as Japan began to look outward for the first time in centuries. Quickly appreciating the importance of naval arms to national power, the Japanese created a naval force tasked with protecting its shores. Turning to the British the Japanese not only brought over advisers from there to train their officers but purchased many of its first vessels from its shipbuilders — a necessary step given the undeveloped state of Japanese industry at that time.

By the 1890s the Japanese possessed a small but respectable force, yet the navy still was junior to the army in both status and planning. This changed with Japan's wars of expansion, first with China in 1894-5, then with Russia ten years later. It was then that the Imperial Japanese Navy shifted from a coastal-defense role to one designed to project Japanese power in accordance with the dominant Western strategic thinking of that time. Japan's navy impressed observers with their performance in these two wars, especially with their defeat of the Russians. Here Evans and Peattie stress the importance of the battle of Tsushima both in establishing the navy's reputation and in defining its subsequent thinking. The clash was decisive in ending Russia's hopes for victory in the Russo-Japanese War, and — even more significantly — cemented the idea of the *kantai kessen*, or decisive battle, in Japanese naval thinking, which would define both the development of the IJN for the remainder of its existence and its conduct of the war against the United States forty years later.

This path was set virtually from the start. For the first decades of its existence Japanese naval strategists regarded regional powers — first China, then Russia — as their most likely opponents. Having defeated both countries, and with an alliance with Great Britain securely in place the United States now became the most likely opponent in a future war. Japan's response to international trends, from the arms races of the 1910s to the arms control treaties of the 1920s were shaped by this, as were ideas about warship design. This did not necessarily have to lead to war, but as Japan contemplated further expansion of its empire it always did so with an eye towards a possible challenge from the Americans, and prepared accordingly.

The result was a fleet designed to defeat the United States Navy in accordance with *kantai kessen*. Accepting that the United States would possess an unavoidable numerical advantage, the Japanese emphasized quality in naval design and the development of weapons such as the "Long Lance" torpedo and tactics such as night-time fighting that would offset the Americans' superior numbers. These were tested in maneuvers that sometimes cost lives, but resulted in a force which was ready to implement doctrine in practice when war came. The opportunity arose first in China in 1937; here Evans and Peattie stress the often underappreciated advantage four years of combat experience gave the IJN at the start of their conflict with the United States -- experience which the United States would offset only after months of bloody lessons in the South Pacific in

1942 and 1943.

Evans and Peattie conclude their book with a short chapter summarizing the impact of this development on Japan's conduct of the Pacific War. Yet the relative brevity of this section understates the value of this book for readers interested in the Japanese Navy's performance in the Second World War. This is by far the single best book in English on the history of the Imperial Japanese Navy, one that is likely to remain the definitive text on the subject and necessary reading for anyone who wants to learn about Japanese military history or the development of naval combat in the Pacific during the war.

Jesse Callaghan says

The depth of scholarship and strength of arguments is superb! What a book.

Jon says

A really excellent history of the Imperial Japanese Navy from 1887 to 1941, concentrating on strategy, tactics and technology. The IJN emerges as an organisation that overreached itself through obsession with decisive battle - the shadow of Tsushima lasted long and corrupted deeply. Tactics and technology were focussed on one aim; beat the Americans through superior materiel, hard training and mystical warrior spirit. This became the justification for the IJN's existence in its struggles for prestige and funds with the Army. Inevitably, the war the Navy planned for became a self fulfilling prophecy. The militaristic middle ranking officer cliques of the thirties believed that they could not fight a war without oil, so to be safe from the Americans they needed to seize the oilfields in south-east Asia. But this circular reasoning provoked the very war that they feared, the very war they could not win. There are similarities with the Imperial German Navy, an organisation which also justified its own budgets by defining itself against an initially imagined, but later very real, rival.

The bankruptcy of Japanese strategy driven by the IJN was profound. Before World War One they fought two very successful regional wars both one-on-one with limited naval powers and cleanly ended in short order by a treaty. It was the IJN's folly to apply the same model to unnecessary war with the United States.

Sean Chick says

A massive and sprawling book, considered the best on the Imperial Japanese Navy. I have to agree. Evans and Peattie are fair to the Japanese, documenting strengths and weaknesses, and the evolution of doctrine, strategy, and technology and the interconnection between them, as well as Japanese culture. Yamamoto, now often seen as borderline incompetent, is treated with a fairness one rarely sees today. Same is true for their take on the design of the Yamato class battleships.

The book is not for the faint of heart, but the prose is better than expected and illustrations are wonderful. The book avoids the common pitfalls of hindsight. This is military history at its peak.

AskHistorians says

Although this is technically a pre-war book, since it covers the navy only up to Pearl Harbor, it's great reading to understand the Japanese strategic situation and how it influenced the building of their navy.

Justin says

A superb magnum opus from the late David Evans and Mark Peattie.

Al says

This was a very enjoyable read. The author's writing style made it flow very smoothly and it wasn't a chore. Another aspect of the book that made it so good was how the author seamlessly transitioned between the three levels of war and described how each level impacted the other. The most significant portions of the book were on the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War, and the author does an outstanding job in showing how these experiences significantly impacted the IJN up to the attack on Pearl Harbor, which mirrored the attack on Port Arthur in so many ways. The development of improved torpedo design and improved naval design of battleships and aircraft carriers was shown to play a significant role in the development strategy, and the author demonstrated its impact on IJN operations in the late 30s and early 40s. Overall an excellent book which shows the enduring influence of Corbett and Mahan.

Willie says

So to summarize, the Japanese had a plan for a war that was really a plan for a battle. A plan in which the US react the way the Japanese predicted and not deviate in any way. There was also willful ignorance of US industrial capacity. The key takeaway: between 1942 and 1945, the IJN commissioned ~500,000 tons of warships while the USN commissioned 3,000,000+ tons.

Rbolia says

Eloquently written treatment of the rise of the Imperial Japanese Navy. Lots of good maps and line drawings of ships. Focuses on the development of strategy, especially that for the early defeat of the USN, and of the development of battleships, carrier aviation, and submarines. The only game in town on this topic.

Alan says

Outstanding in both scope and readability, this brilliant volume covers the entire history of the Imperial Japanese Navy from the moment Perry's Black Ships entered Tokyo Bay and opened Japan to the world to the return of the US Navy to the same body of water nearly 100 years later, this time in the form of the USS

Missouri arriving to receive Japan's formal surrender, in 1945. The main focus is the period from the Sino-Japanese War, when the new fleet first saw action until just before the fateful attack on Pearl Harbor. The authors cover every pertinent detail, from the personalities, weapons systems and tactics to the role of culture and spirit, that led to the initial success, and ultimate defeat, of the Imperial Japanese Navy. A first rate history and essential reading for any student of the Pacific War.

Nic says

Great book. Filled in a lot of gap I had from only reading western oriented history. Recommended.

Charles says

Kaigun is an important read for someone with *both* a strong background and a keen interest in naval history and the Pacific War. In great detail it goes through the history of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) from Perry's *Black Ships* right up to (but excluding) the Pacific War. It's a history of men, organizations, machines and doctrine. Doctrine includes the evolution of strategy and tactics. I had several revelations on 19th and early 20th century naval history reading this book. However, this book is not perfect. The level of detail can vary, sometimes greatly between the sections, although it is generally quite high. The book has a laser focus on the IJN. However, it purposefully avoids details of Imperial Japanese: politics, diplomacy and the Army that greatly affected the IJN during its history. A reader *without* a background in late 19th to early 20th century Japanese Imperial history will only benefit from a small part of this book. Having written that, to a serious student of late 19th and early 20th century naval history this is a must read.

In general, the book was well edited. The book's prose is good. It is less technically dense than strictly militarily-authored works I've read. Very occasionally I found awkward constructions, but information was conveyed in a clear and unambiguous fashion.

Use of maps was good. I would have liked there to have been more and greater detailed maps. In addition, I would have liked them to use standard military symbols.

Diagrams usage was excellent. I found myself poring at length over the ship and aircraft diagrams.

Chart and graph usage was fair. Some were not immediately understandable to me. Their usage would have benefited from some information design and data visualization analysis. Compared to the quality of the maps and diagrams the charts and graphs appeared amateurish.

The authors wrote this book to describe the IJN's organization, technology, strategy and tactics. To this end, they were very successful. I felt they were most successful in describing the: technology, strategy and tactics. The organization somewhat less so. In particular there was a concentration on the air and surface ship arms of the IJN. Any issues I have with these are merely quibbles.

A quibbling example would be, is that without Japanese language or cultural training, the IJN's ship naming conventions will be opaque. Most western naval historians understand the naming conventions used for 19th and early 20th century American warships. An American ship named *Arizona* is immediately recognized as a battleship (BB) because it's a US state name. The IJN's convention was more complex. For example, the

Shōkaku-class fleet carriers *might* translate to the Crane-class after the waterfowl with mythical Japanese significance. The authors *did* explain the naming of the *Yamato*-class battleships but none other.

The discussion of the IJN's submarine service was more detailed than any I've ever encountered. However, it was considerably less detailed than the air or surface ship discussions. For example, still left largely unexplained was why despite having German Allies and earlier observing WWI submarine tactics *wolfpacking* and preying on the extensive supply train the Americans would need were never adopted as part of overall strategy.

An area I thought was not covered adequately was the effect of geography on strategy and logistics. Study of additional smaller scaled maps was called-for to me to understand the progressive construction of IJN home islands fleet bases and air stations. In addition, the final evolution of the attritive strategy against the American advance across the Pacific was dependent on island airfields fortified with land based naval bombers. The names, locations and the operation of the interlocking network of island naval bases and airfields were never described. Truk being an exception.

My great caution over this book is that the authors break the link between "cause and effect". This book is about the *Navy*. They took a very parochial approach to the IJN's story to keep their page count manageable. You will find a superb discussion of the *Battle of Tsushima Strait*. However, the IJN was greatly affected by Japanese: politics, diplomacy and the IJN's nemesis the Imperial Japanese Army. *The Washington Naval Treaty of 1922* had at least as much effect on the development of the IJN as the *Battle of Tsushima Strait*. The authors decline to delve into the politics of the naval limitation treaties despite their effect on naval construction. A reader who is not cognizant of late 19th and early 20th century world and Japanese history is frequently going to be left wondering, *Why did they (the IJN) do it that way?*

Finally, the IJN's story is about men, machines and organizations in contention. The IJN spanned almost one hundred years in a time of rapid technological and political change. The book was a worthwhile read for someone interested in naval history and the lead-up to the Pacific War. The narrative is authoritative in the changes in the IJN's : military technology, organizational behavior, strategy and tactics for the period covered, which is just short of the Pacific War. However, to get a full(er) picture of the IJN previous knowledge of late 19th and early 20th century Imperial Japanese diplomatic and political history is needed .

Readers of this book may also be interested in: *War Plan Orange: The U. S. Strategy To Defeat Japan, 1897-1945* by Edward S. Mille (my review).

Lee says

This was a long and detailed slog to read. I think the best summary is in the epilogue, stating that the IJN failed to prepare for war, per se, but prepared almost exclusively for battle.

I expect to use it for reference at some future date.

Bill V says

This is an excellent book. It does not go into specific battles or campaigns of the Second World War but it

does a fantastic job describing the birth, growth and maturation of the Imperial Japanese Navy to the eve of the Second World War. The evolution of strategy, tactics and military philosophy and views are discussed in great detail. Many of the key figures as well as previously lesser known ones and their respective impact are discussed. My favorites parts were the evolution of weapons systems such as their torpedoes and carrier doctrine.
