Welcome to the December meeting of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight’s speaker is Stephen Moore, author of Pacific Payback and The Battle for Hell’s Island, he will be speaking this evening on developments in naval aviation in the Pacific from Pearl Harbor to the Battle of Midway. He will be join by veterans of the Pacific air campaign.

Aviation changed rapidly between the Wright Brothers’ first flight in 1903 to Lindbergh’s solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927 to supersonic aircraft in the 1950s. The pace of change rivals that of computer technology in the late 20th century.

From the start, innovative pilots and military leaders sought military applications for this fragile flying machine. Before the Great War, the Italians used aircraft in Libya and an American pilot flew in the Balkan War, providing reconnaissance for armies. Within weeks of the start of World War I, airplanes became a central part of military actions, not only in monitoring troop movements but in combat. At first pilots were armed with pistols or rifles; machine guns quickly followed. The most serious problem became how to shoot forward - to aim the whole plane – without shooting off your own propeller. The Dutch designer Anthony Fokker developed an interrupter gear, for the German army, which synchronized the machine gun to fire at the rate and time to pass through the propeller arc without hitting the blades. Until the Allies developed a similar mechanism, German aviators had a great advantage in aerial combat and were able to reduce or prevent Allied aerial reconnaissance. By the end of the war all the elements for air power in future wars: strategic bombing; interdiction; close air support; reconnaissance; air defense; and air superiority. Nonetheless, the full potential and the real limitations of air power remained unclear.

Not to be outdone, the Navies too found uses for the airplane. First, by employing airplanes for aerial spotting of submarines and reconnaissance. At sea, purpose-designed airplanes – sea-planes – were hoisted over the side to take off and land on the water alongside. The first plane to take off from a ship occurred in 1910 from the USS Birmingham. By 1918, the British had a landing deck on the back of ships allowing planes to land and take off. In the interwar years (particularly the 1920s), the United States and the Japanese Empire showed the most interest in developing maritime aviation.

The Imperial Japanese Navy’s Hōshō and the Royal Navy’s Hermes were the first purpose-built carriers with full-length flight decks and a side-mounted control tower island. The British carriers had armored flight decks while the US and IJN favored unarmored, inflammable, wooden decks – both shifted to armored decks mid-war.

Both the Navy and the Marines began extensive experiments with aviation. The Marines began developing dive-bombing techniques in 1919. In 1922, the US Navy commissioned its first aircraft carrier, a converted collier, the USS Langley (CV-1). Though the battleship admirals remained wedded to their big guns and Mahanian decisive battles – as were the Japanese admirals, Rear Admiral William A. Moffett convinced them that air power could be a major part of the fleet. Moffet, not himself an aviator, was a master politician, friend of Assistant Secretary/President Franklin Roosevelt, and a master of the naval bureaucracy.

In both navies, the reconnaissance function was primary and carriers were not the primary fleet weapons system. On the eve of the Second World War, the Imperial Japanese Navy had the most well-developed carrier doctrine — including offensive components not found in the USN, the best carriers, the best naval aircraft, the best aircrews and best pilots. (Unfortunately for the IJN, seniority gave command to VADM Nagumo, a cruiser admiral who did not make best use of his tools.)

Naval warfare changed on a quiet Sunday morning in Hawaii, December 7, 1941. Although the Japanese surprise attack proved to be an operational and strategic failure, the destruction of the USN’s battleships meant the carriers became the primary offensive weapons platform by default. Failing to destroy the fleet repair facilities and oil reserves meant many damages and sunk ships could be raised and repaired without going to the mainland, and the

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com
aircraft carriers that were not in harbor were able to refuel, take on more planes and pilots, and begin operations.

The US fleet aircraft carriers, notably the original three — USS Yorktown (CV-5), USS Lexington (CV-2), and USS Enterprise (CV-6) — easily ranged the vast distances of the Pacific with their attendant screens of cruisers and destroyers. Of necessity, they operated in separate task forces rather than fleet actions as the IJN could do. During the first seven months of the war, the usefulness of these “floating cities” became obvious. The Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942 was a new type of sea battle waged with the exchange of air strikes, the opposing surface ships never coming into gunnery range or making direct contact. The climax came with the Battle of Midway in June 1942 when American aircraft destroyed four Japanese aircraft carriers, Akagi, Kaga, Soryu, and Hiryu. Even more important was the loss of Japan’s most experienced flight crews, the best trained in the world.

Midway turned the war in America’s favor.

Further Readings:

Announcements:
Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - Dec. 15, 2015 – *Union Men of Texas* - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com
St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - Jan. 25, 2015 – *Anglo-American Relations* - 715-386-1268 – rossandhaines@comcast.net
RADM Moffet, USN, MH
USS Langley (CV-1) on commissioning
USS Langley (CV-1) receiving first aircraft
USS Enterprise (CV-6)