

Fiona Amundsen: Operation Magic

Text by Tim Corballis

What struck the pilots was, more than anything, the combined weight of quiet moments. The noise of the planes' engines soon factored itself out as background so that their flights were more silent than their time on the ground: the drone was the sound silence made. The planes were light as thought. This meant that they hovered like thoughts over the harbour, moving up and away and back, dwelling, surprisingly, since they had been trained for action, in the inactive naturalness and the feeling of air and water, all this between the punctuations of aerial torpedoes detonating

but already far below. When they pulled away they were like the seabirds distancing themselves from a startling noise, finding a quiet sphere from which to look back.

The receding face of war

Writing at the end of the 1920s, the conservative German writer Ernst Jünger noted that the first world war had been marked by two aspects of technology: the technical precision of warfare itself, 'whose weapons of annihilation can locate the enemy to the exact second and meter';¹ and the ability to record the conflict with the same precision. Photography was one of the primary media of that record: '[d]ay in and day out, optical lenses were pointed at the combat zones alongside the mouths of rifles and cannons'.² War was transformed by its machines into a previously unknown technical labour, but technology also allowed non-combatants to view it up close through its images. The photograph gave war, as in the title of *Das Antlitz des Weltkrieges*, Jünger's book of photographs and essays relating the experience of WWI soldiers, a countenance.

By the time of the second world war, the techniques for fighting war threatened to outstrip the techniques for imagining it. Jünger had already predicted that the first world war would be both the first and last to offer a close and comprehensive vision to the outside observer, as indeed to its own participants. Subsequent wars would, as in any area marked by technological development, become distanced and abstracted. No longer the drawn-out standoff of the battlefield, future wars would be defined by the increasing mobility and range of their weapons, the irrelevance of the 'front' and the direct, aerial targeting of strategic sites.

¹ Ernst Jünger (1993) *War and Photography*, Tr. Anthony Nassar, *New German Critique*, No. 59, 24

² *ibid.*

World War II confirmed Jünger's prediction. Anonymous weapons began to have a decisive impact. They removed the struggle to an increasing degree from the earthbound battlefield, and they removed the weapon's trigger—as with the bomb, rocket, or gas chamber—further and further from its victim. Although battlefield photographs continued to have their impact, the defining ground images of the second world war show the victims of anonymous, distanced or technically administered destruction and killing, in which the agents of that killing are absent. War's countenance threatened to retreat into obscurity, and war to become an abstract, unimaginable thing that left bodies and wreckage in its wake. As ground images were unable to capture the relationship between effect and its distant cause, another form of image began to have increasing relevance: the aerial photograph and the map.

Effects without causes

For Americans, the images that marked their own war included widely disseminated photos of the USS Arizona, burning for days after its forward magazines were ignited during the Pearl Harbour attack. These photographs bear all the pathos of aftermath. They are witness only to simple destruction, not to the bomb or torpedo, plane and pilot, or indeed the Japanese national and imperial war aims that were its cause, all of which were some distance away when the photos were taken.

Does the absence of the visible aggressor in these images help to prompt and support the enduring set of questions and myths that surround the event? A 'simply' exploding vessel needs the story of its explosion. Eye witness reports were confused. Some, like the account of the ship's destruction set off by a bomb down its funnel, or the glancing blow off the number two turret, were both later falsified by marine archaeologists: neither the stack nor the number two turret showed signs of such damage. It remains uncertain whether the magazine was set off by aerial torpedoes puncturing the hull, or (more likely) by the naval artillery shell, modified into an aerial bomb, whose base plate is now in the collections of the Aberdeen Proving Ground Museum in Maryland. The base plate, a piece of metal, is missing a portion of its potential significance because of this uncertainty.

The question of the Pacific

The attack and its images also made a question out of something else: the vast space to the west of America's West Coast. The Pacific Ocean had a long history in the Western imagination, evolving from ancient arguments about the 'antipodes', the far side of the globe that was simultaneously an opposite and a site of wish-fulfilment for European cultures. It was a place of 'oceanic' chaos, where nothing solid could take hold, an empty and unimaginable place between continents. It was also the site of images of wealth and peace, the redemption of Europe's own violence. The discovery of the Pacific by Europeans vastly increased the dimensions of the world known to them, even as it led toward Asia and the closure of the globe's latitudes.

The Pacific formed an enormous space between the US and Asia. To the United States, it was useful for its relative emptiness as an oceanic buffer, and for the islands that punctuated it, allowing for permanent occupying forces. Although Hawaii had already been under the control of American plantation owners for some years, it was the Pacific theatre of the Spanish-American War that finally prompted its annexation as a US territory. Hawaii was a useful mid-point in the strategic view towards the Philippines and Asia, and a major facet of the creation of a US 'two-ocean navy'.

For such eyes, the Pacific is simultaneously empty and full: it is the emptiness of the gap between Asia and America; it is the fullness of a territory to be occupied in its own right. It is the meeting of water, islands, and the continents that bound it. It rises into the imagination when its waters are converted into a further frontier, an extension of the plains for the expansions of manifest destiny; and then it sinks, Atlantis-like, when sights are turned back towards the land itself. In the years after World War I and the Treaty of Versailles, the US was foremost amongst those nations that forgot the wider globe and raised a shoulder against the world outside its borders.

Impossible height

Forced into the center of World War II by the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Americans suddenly awakened to the fact that we are definitely concerned with that part of the earth which extends beyond our natural, and heretofore impregnable, boundaries.

More completely world-wide in scope than the war of 1914-1918, World War II became known to writers and speakers as a *global* war. The new and significant role played by the airplane and air power in this war served to emphasize the general geographical illiteracy of the American public.

It soon became apparent that our geographical viewpoint was again in need of adjustment to meet the new demands of our political and military leaders, as well as for educating the man on the street in the new *global* concepts.³

- *Walter Ristow, head librarian of the map collection, New York Public Library, 1944*

In an address of early 1942, President Roosevelt asked each American citizen to buy a map. Even before this, in late 1941 after the attack, maps of the world and of the Pacific were selling out throughout the States. The war prompted a new geography, and a new cartography. One of the less known skirmishes of the war, then, was that taking place

³ Walter W. Ristow (1944) *Air Age Geography: A Critical Appraisal and Bibliography*, *Journal of Geography*, 43:9, 332.

between map-makers: Hitler's propaganda maps were opposed to the objective maps of the scientists; but the latter, dry and lacking in symbols, could not grip the imagination of the public. At the same time, planes were redefining the shape of the world, and the ways in which it could be viewed.

Already since before World War I, the world had begun to be understood as a profoundly interrelated geopolitical system whose shape, and image of closure, was the globe. Western public imagination was gripped by polar exploration—another final frontier, and one that again finalised the world's curvature—and by the achievements of pioneer aviators. Planes themselves brought the world's furthest corners within reach, shrinking its distances and neutralising geographical obstacles to transport, while also hugely broadening the opportunities for aerial views. The imagination had begun to leave the surface of the earth. This was the beginning of the 'air age', which brought with it new requirements and new opportunities for vision.

The air age meant adding other forms of map to the standard, north-oriented mercator projection, a naval and territorial form of mapping, one suited to east-west travel and one that preserved compass direction at the expense of vastly deforming the scale of polar regions. Instead, many argued for azimuthal projections, often centred on the north pole, views 'down' over the globe, which also emphasised, say, that a plane could reach Oslo more readily from Seattle than it could Tokyo. Such polar projections could not, of course, represent the Pacific war, which took place as much in southern latitudes as it did in northern ones. Maps, then, began to proliferate: azimuthal projections centred on different points of interest, depending on purpose or perspective; strategic maps with established war iconography for fronts, strengths and directions of push; newspaper and magazine maps, incorporating text and imagery and drawing on cartoonists' conventions; maps that emphasised the earth's curvature, as if offering a view from a real point above the atmosphere. Maps proliferated not only in number but in kind.

A sudden need for maps in the context of the first global war, then, and a simultaneous question about what a map could be and do. Pearl Harbour gave us ways to look at the world: alongside the close-up 'experiential' view of effects without causes, we now had the distanced, non-experienced imagination of impossible height. The splitting of the world into two views, neither able to make up for its shortcomings, and unable to be put together again into a unified whole. How do we remember something that has not been seen?

Water into earth I

One of the ways in which the air age neutralised geographical features was, relatively speaking, to reduce the difference between land and ocean: the plane did not care what was under it. Even when it came to landing, aircraft carriers, which also came to prominence in World War II, meant that airstrips themselves moved out to sea.

Strangely enough, oceans become continents. The shifting thing, the oceanic chaos, was

pegged down in the imagination as land, but featureless and blue, the ultimate flat surface to be occupied. The occupation of the sea, however, was not fully possible; imperial interests clung to the islands all the more strongly, commandeering them from their indigenous occupants.

Water into earth II

Modernist architects had already seen ships for what they increasingly were: buildings. Modernism took its white, functional forms from the superstructures of the great ocean liners. This is still visible in high rise apartments in some cities: consciously or unconsciously, their facades bring to mind an ocean light, as if they are oceangoing vessels themselves. Their presence on land is not, however, a sign of the earth becoming water, but a sign that ships themselves have long been so large as to become islands, cities or—as Alan Sekula pointed out—factories. There are views of ships, then, when newly moored, that invite a kind of double take to those noticing them for the first time: especially seen from between other buildings, when the water itself is obscured and wharf surface becomes road, they give the impression of a building, sprung up out of nowhere.

The terrestrial nature of naval ordnance: after the attack, parts of the Arizona were salvaged for re-use. In particular, three of the four artillery turrets were removed, and two of them emplaced on concrete and earth foundations at strategic sites on the island of Oahu: one on Mokapu Head and the other on the western slopes of the Wianae Mountains. These gun emplacements were intended to be part of a ring of coastal defences in case of a Japanese naval attack on Hawaii. The Mokapu Head battery was test-fired once in August 1945, shortly before the Japanese surrender. Both batteries were later decommissioned and scrapped.

Water into earth III

A 1938 Pacific map, “US Navy, Ships, Bases, Men” by Richard Edes Harrison, perhaps the most influential popular cartographer of the American war, is already an argument for a strategic and territorial vision of the ocean. It is a mercator projection—appropriate for the largely equatorial concentration of naval power—showing, in an iconography familiar to naval hobbyists, US Navy ship, aircraft and personnel numbers at their various ports, as well as distances from one to the other. It also includes circles for the range of aircraft around their bases: darker blue zones solidified in the lighter blue of the ocean. To emphasise the artificiality of the projection and help explain the distortion of some of these circles, a curved globe view of the ocean is inset, with some of the same information sketched in. Through the middle of the northern part of the map, following a line of longitude, is the strangest ‘territorial’ feature: the ‘Fence’, the line demarcating the conventional limits of US and Japanese manoeuvres on either side.

Territorial waters, patrolled and owned—this is nothing new. Land has been reaching out to the ocean for centuries, through a mixture of technology and state power, international

legal negotiation and war. For many states in the 18th century, it was the reach of a cannon that defined the territorial claim—that part of the ocean defensible from land. The circles on Harrison's map and the 'Fence' are not territories laid down by international law, but they have territorial features nonetheless: invisible lines impossibly drawn on water; the conversion of sea into land, a conversion anchored by the genuine soil and rock of islands.

The globe's surface, anchored by its islands

In 1946, Chile unilaterally declared a 200 nautical mile (370km) fishing limit, and was followed shortly after by Ecuador and Peru; finally the 1970 Declaration of Montevideo brought in other Latin American states. This economic assertion of the global South was belatedly recognised in the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which included the establishment of 200 nautical mile 'Exclusive Economic Zones' for all parties to it. (The US, although it never ratified UNCLOS, wrote the 200 mile EEZ into its own law under Reagan). This, at once a vindication of the claim of the developing nations of Latin America, also extended that claim to most other states. It vastly increased a form of ownership over the Earth's surface, even as it added overlapping and contested zones in several places (most famously the South China Sea). It was part of the continuing inscription of circles and lines, and benefitted those states in possession of the island scraps that now count as empire: small islands at the centre of vast new territories of water. Taking into account this ocean-made-territory, the United States more than doubles in area from its land holdings, and New Zealand and the UK increase more than 20-fold. Its islands give the US the largest claim of any nation to the Pacific Ocean—a surface area larger than that of the Chinese mainland—followed closely by New Zealand and France. Empire lives, not now as great tracts of land, but as their ghost, water into earth.

Tim Corballis is the author of the novels *Below* (2001), *Measurement* (2002) and *The Fossil Pits* (2005, all Victoria University Press), as well as numerous stories, essays and other short pieces. He has collaborated with Fiona Amundsen since 2004 on projects including *Si c'est (if it is)* (Physics Room, 2008) and the ongoing work *The Long Fall*. His essay 'Winter' was winner of the 2013 Landfall Essay Competition (see Landfall 226, forthcoming). He has recently submitted his doctoral thesis, on aesthetic theory in the context of the Antipodes, to the University of Auckland.