Twitter Thread by Thomas Shugart

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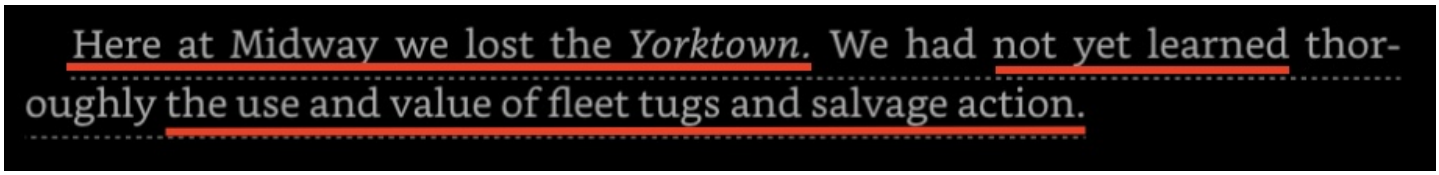
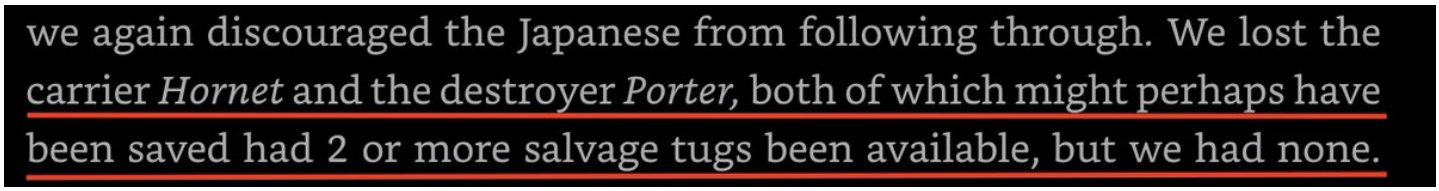
A few thoughts about tugs:

As I've been reading Beans, Bullets, and Black Oil, a 1952 book about logistics in the Pacific in WWII, I've been struck how often the topic of tugs has come up: ships that were saved because of their presence, or perhaps lost due to their absence.

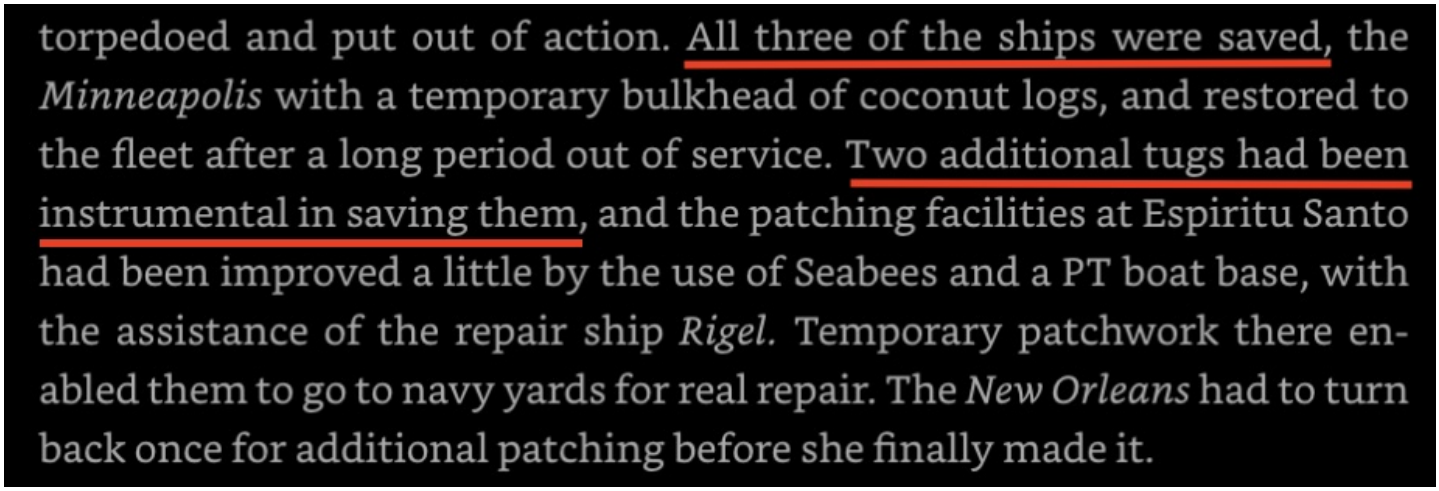
Some examples that jumped right out: that the carrier USS Yorktown might have been saved at Midway, had the Navy yet appreciated the value of fleet tugs.



That the carrier USS Hornet and destroyer USS Porter might have been saved at the Battle of the Santa Cruz islands if tugs had been available:



And that tugs were able to help save three heavily damaged cruisers after the Battle of Tassafaronga:



By my count it looks like the USN started WWII with 20 or so ocean-going tugs (ATs) available. And then over the course of the war, as lessons were learned, the USN built 200+ more (ATAs and ATFs), many of which served for decades more. https://t.co/d58helDqpP

During the war, the Navy also built or converted 40-odd dedicated rescue and salvage ships (ARSs) that were also crucial to repairing battle damage and rescuing crews. https://t.co/d58helDqpP

This all made me wonder - now that we have reason to worry again about USN ships potentially being disabled in combat in the vastness of the Pacific, how are we doing in this area - tug and salvage capability - now?

From what I can tell, here are the numbers: for its worldwide responsibilities, the USN currently has 3 fleet tugs (T-ATFs) - 1 each in the Pacific, Atlantic, and in Bahrain. https://t.co/Fvao5QlRLU

MSC also owns 2 Safeguard-class salvage and rescue ships (ARSs) and 1 additional civilian tug (MV Gary Chouest). https://t.co/UMlxOKabcy

Since most of MSC's current tugs & salvage ships are ~40 years old, there's a new class of 8 ships in the works - the Navajo-class - intended to replace both the fleet tugs and salvage ships with a single platform, and based on a commercial design. https://t.co/BX27x39mDM

An obvious question for me: how does the PLA Navy stack up here?

One sometimes hears the PLAN described as a brittle and inexperienced force, unlikely to be able to succeed in real-world combat. How well have they provided for forces to conduct recovery and salvage?

Here are the numbers, from ONI's latest PLAN identification guide:
- 14 tugs (ATAs)
- 13 PLAN rescue/salvage ships (ARSs), w/ 27 more under Ministry of Transportation

Worth noting IMO is that these are all likely to be located in the western Pacific. https://t.co/23uccgzcL6

The PLAN also has a new class of 6000 ton ocean-going tugs under production, with some sources indicating a likely run of 21 hulls. https://t.co/GTaaMCysSf

So does the USN have a Tug Gap that needs to be closed?

Not specifically so, but IMO the relative lack of this capability is symptomatic, along with stories of double-pumped deployments and the like, of trying to run a worldwide Navy on the cheap...

...against an authoritarian maritime power of the first order, one who seems to have an iron will to challenge the Western naval superiority that has underwritten the world order as we've known it since WWII.

Fin.