

By Cdr. Peter B. Mersky, USNR (Ret.)

Tillman, Barrett. *Helldiver Units of World War 2.*

Osprey, Reed Books, Michelin House, 81 Fulham Rd., London SW3 6RB, UK. 1997. 96 pp. Ill. \$15.95.

Number 3 in the new series of "Combat Aircraft" books by this established publisher, it is also representative of the author's crisp, wry style. Don't be fooled by this book's (and others' in this series) small size; there's a wealth of information in the text, photos and appendices. The folio of color profiles is certainly well-done but quite bland, showing how colorless many mid- and late-WW II Navy aircraft were.

There is good detail on the SB2C, probably the best account of this enigmatic, much-maligned dive-bomber yet written. As the author observes near the end of the book, "The SB2C's wartime success was gained against greater odds than most combat aircraft. Burdened with a flawed design, and following an unusually troubled 'incubation' period, the *Helldiver* overcame most of its original deficiencies to become not merely an adequate dive-bomber, but one regarded with affection by most of its airmen."

Tillman describes the plane's service in U.S. Navy and Marine Corps squadrons, as well as in French, Italian and Thai units.

Providing inexpensive, well-illustrated and well-written books on sometimes exotic subjects about which we are all curious, this open-ended series is serious aviation history, and I can't recommend it highly enough.

Rahn, Bob, with Zip Rausa. *Tempting Fate: An*

*Experimental Test Pilot's Story.* Specialty Press, 11481 Kost Dam Rd., North Branch, MN 55056. 1998. 175 pp. Ill. \$22.95.

There are a lot of interesting details packed into this short autobiography of an early jet-age test pilot. Although Bob Rahn is probably best known for his record-setting flights in the 1950s in the Douglas F4D *Skyray*, his life in the air produced many more experiences, all of which come to light in this well-written book.

Rahn started out as a U.S. Army Air Forces pilot with the 31st Fighter Group, 12th Air Force. He flew Supermarine *Spitfires* in North Africa, shooting down two German aircraft, and managing to fall afoul of General George Patton (apparently not too difficult to do) when he failed to salute the volatile tanker general.

Returning home, Rahn became a test pilot, and even added the P-59—the first American jet—to his logbook. Eventually, Rahn's career focused on testing Navy aircraft, including the AD *Skyraider*, F3D *Skyknight*, XA2D *Skyshark*, A4D *Skyhawk*, the F4D *Skyray* and its graceful derivative, the F5D *Skylander*. The book's photos are well-chosen and well-reproduced, showing the aircraft and people Rahn came to know in his 30-year career.

Rahn describes the record flights in the *Skyray*, as well as the time he dead-sticked an F4D and had to sit in

a full pressure suit in 130-degree heat waiting for rescue.

As I have mentioned often in the last few years, we are in a period when many of our legendary aviators will soon leave us. Fortunately, some of these colorful men choose to put down their experiences in autobiographies that describe well-known as well as less familiar experiences that round out the individual's life and career.

*Tempting Fate* is such a story.

Cull, Brian, with David Nicolle and Shlomo Aloni.

*Wings Over Suez.* Grub Street, London. 1997. 385 pp. Ill. \$49.95.

The air war in the Middle East has always been a subject veiled in security-enhanced mystery. Reporting on the several Arab-Israeli conflicts beginning right after WW II has been an occupation best left to those with a stout heart and the patience of a saint. However, in the last 20 years the resources available to those who know where to look have increased dramatically. The result has been the appearance of several in-depth accounts detailing military aviation in this arena.

Following up on their earlier book, *Spitfires Over Israel* (Grub Street, London, 1996)—about Israel's War of Independence in 1948 and the initial growth of the Israel Air Force—these three historians have broken new ground with this weighty account of the 1956 campaign sparked by the nationalizing of the Suez Canal by the Egyptians under their mercurial president, Gamal Nasser.

In the May–June 1997 issue, we reviewed *Phoenix Over the Nile* (Smithsonian Press, Washington, D.C., 1996), a joint effort by David Nicolle and American author Lon Nordeen, which relates the history of the Egyptian Air Force. *Wings Over Suez* offers more detail, but together these two books greatly expand the published information on the Egyptian air force.

In this book, the authors present an interesting history and accompanying assembly of photos that shows French F4Us and F-84Fs; Royal Navy *Sea Hawks*, *Attackers* and *Wyverns*; and Royal Air Force *Canberras*, which saw their fair share of action and even a few aerial engagements with Egyptian MiGs.

There is a good amount of material on the Egyptian and Israeli air forces. However, readers interested in the Israel Air Force will be left with more questions than answers about Israeli aircraft and pilots.

The chapters on British and French carriers in action give detailed accounts of these naval aviators' experiences flying prop and jet fighters and bombers against occasionally intense Egyptian flak during raids ashore. *Sea Venoms*, *Attacker* and *Sea Hawks* of the Fleet Air Arm saw heavy action during the week-long campaign, as did the squadrons of French F4Us.

*Wings Over Suez* fills a gap in this volatile and interesting area of military aviation history.