

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

Mikoyan, Stepan. *Stepan Anastasovich Mikoyan: Memoirs of Military Test Flying and Life with the Kremlin's Elite*. Airlife Publishing Ltd., 101 Longden Rd., Shrewsbury SY3 9EB, England. Can be ordered from U.S. Naval Institute, Annapolis, MD 21402. 1999. Ill. \$45.

This excellent autobiography is an unexpected window into the ethics and collective experience of the Soviet military and the Soviet air force's test pilots. Always with a careful look over the shoulder at the USSR hierarchy, the author—nephew of the “Mi” part of “MiG”—describes what it was like growing up right after the revolutions and taking flight training for the Great Patriotic War, the Russian name for WW II.

Stories of combat flying during the war and of testing the early generation of Soviet jets abound, and are well worth the price of the book. We meet Stalin and Krushchev and various aircraft designers, whose names we usually only see when naming an aircraft from their factories. Besides inside stories about Stalin's after-hours parties and the activities of his son, we learn that Nikita Krushchev, the nemesis of presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, was very interested in aircraft development and watched many new types going through demonstration air shows. He also was completely sold on all-missile armament.

The narrative's overall human quality strips away the veneer of a monolithic society and its automatons that we in the West have painted over the Russians and their military. We see the faces and emotions of the pilots as they react to actions and losses, giving them a humanity we probably never granted them during the long, intense period of the Cold War. Simply put, this book is a pleasurable revelation.

O'Hara, Thomas. *Marine Corps Air Station El Toro*. Arcadia Publishing, 2 Cumberland St., Charleston, SC 29401. 1999. 128 pp. Ill. \$18.99.

A disappointing volume in this publisher's “Images of America” series, and a poor runner-up to Sean Milligan's two-volume set on NAS Quonset Point, R.I. Many of the photos don't show El Toro, and the links with the subject aircraft are weak. While occasionally interesting, the photo collection is not well assembled. The pictures often show Marine aircraft in the Pacific during WW II or in Southeast Asia, most of which can be found in books that deal specifically with these areas of interest. The captions, especially, could have used an editor and a proof-reader.

Aircraft designations vary, and there are many factual gaffes. John Glenn did not graduate from Annapolis (p. 70), and the Marine version of the B-25 *Mitchell* was the PBJ, not PBS (p. 18). The group lineup on page 50 doesn't show VMF-212, but VMF-312, known as the *Checkerboards*, as indicated by the distinctly patterned scarves and cowling decorations. Often the captions are

just too wise or cute and detract from the overall effort, and the bottom of the pages are filled with hackneyed quotes. The reader has to lay out a rather hefty price for such a short, small-format book. An important historical base like El Toro deserves better.

Westrum, Ron. *Sidewinder: Creative Missile Development at China Lake*. U.S. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD 21402. 1999. 352 pages. Ill. \$32.95.

This book is another of this publisher's particularly interesting treatise-biographies on weapons systems. It is as much the story of the designers as of the weapon—in this case, the much produced Sidewinder air-to-air missile.

Although the author is obviously not well-versed in Naval Aviation's history or its unique lingo, *Sidewinder* is a valuable, entertaining account of a missile that can be considered the most successful piece of aviation ordnance ever built.

The Sidewinder grew out of the need for a defense against Soviet bombers of the 1950s. Until then, unguided rockets and first-generation, air-launched guided missiles were used. Tests and exercise results were disappointing, however, and eventually a group of engineers designed what became the AIM-9 series that has seen so much combat around the world.

This book takes a little dedication to get through. Its language occasionally drops into engineerese, and the interminable meetings and design conferences tend to bog down the narrative's pace. Nevertheless, *Sidewinder* is a good reference on an important part of military aviation.

Tillman, Barrett. *TBF/TBM Avenger Units of World War 2*. Osprey, PO Box 130, Sterling Heights, MI 48311-0130. 1999. 96 pp. Ill. \$17.95.

Number 16 in the open-ended Combat Aircraft series, this is the fifth book for the series by this well-known authority. He's done books on the F4F *Wildcat*, F6F *Hellcat*, SBD *Dauntless* and SB2C *Helldiver*, and has produced an upcoming volume on the TBD *Devastator*.

The book features the usual folio of color side views, and a powerful cover illustration by Iain Wyllie of an attack on a German U-boat by a TBM. The TBF/TBM's career in the Pacific and the Atlantic are well covered, and the photos show Grumman's big torpedo-bomber in a variety of settings and situations, including aircraft so badly shot up that it leaves you wondering how they got back. (One didn't!)

Firsthand experiences from pilots and crewmen complement the author's text. Along with the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, the *Avenger's* foreign service with Britain's Fleet Air Arm and the Royal New Zealand Air Force are also included.