

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

Osborn, Shane, with Malcolm McConnell. *Born to Fly: The Untold Story of the Downed American Reconnaissance Plane*. Broadway Books, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036. 2001. 262 pp. Ill. \$22.95. Simultaneously published: Osborn, Shane, with Malcolm McConnell. Adapted for young people by Michael French. *Born to Fly: The Heroic Story of Downed U.S. Navy Pilot Lt. Shane Osborn*. Delacorte Press, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036. 2001. 183 pp. Ill. \$15.95.

Having the eyes of the world, including those of your commander in chief and his top military advisors, resting squarely on you and your crew is pretty heavy stuff for a 27-year-old lieutenant aviator. But that was part of the challenge that Shane Osborn and his crew of 23 faced in the first weeks of April 2001. Taking off from Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, in the early morning hours of 1 April, they were anticipating a routine surveillance flight over the South China Sea. However, the flight became anything but routine when two Chinese *Finback* fighters appeared and quickly established close and sloppy formation with the American EP-3E.

After some attention-getting antics, the J-8s came too close, one of them hitting the *Aries II's* No. 1 engine. The huge four-bladed prop tore through the fighter's rear fuselage, and debris carried away the EP-3E's radome. The doomed interceptor and pilot fell into the sea below, leaving the Americans struggling to right their stricken aircraft, literally fighting for their lives in an inverted dive.

Backed up by his crew, Lt. Osborn regained controlled flight after losing nearly 8,000 feet in 30 seconds. The crew decided to land at the Chinese airfield on Hainan Island. After repeated calls for landing instructions went unanswered, they landed the EP-3E and were immediately surrounded by Chinese troops. Eleven days of internment and interrogation followed before the 24 Americans were released to American authorities and allowed to leave Hainan.

The secretive world of airborne electronic intelligence gathering shuns the glare of notoriety, but this VQ-1 crew brought a high level of favorable exposure to their small community. Their story is told in these two books. It's a rather unusual commercial ploy: one "full size" adult-oriented book with all the preflight details, occasional four-letter words and the intense interrogations the crew experienced, published along with a smaller format book whose text is reduced in length and content and focuses on the more exciting aspects of Lt. Osborn's love of flying for the Navy. Note the subtle difference in the two books' subtitles. The adult version touts "The Untold Story," while the junior version promises "The Heroic Story." Both publishers are

imprints of Random House.

The adult book begins with a lengthy description of an EP-3 preflight, allowing the author to introduce his crew and establishing the narrative for what is to come. The text moves back and forth from the present to Osborn's memories of growing up in South Dakota and Nebraska. It's an accepted way of telling a story and moves well. Like many youngsters dreaming of military wings, Osborn had always wanted to fly fighters.

After graduating from the University of Nebraska on a Naval ROTC scholarship, he began flight training. His dream of flying F-14 *Tomcats* or F/A-18 *Hornets* quickly evaporated when the small window of the jet pipeline closed. Undaunted, he chose P-3 *Orions* and got his wings and an assignment to VQ-1. His description of that fateful 1 April mission is worth reading to learn how he and his crew survived what should have been a deadly midair with an overly aggressive Chinese aviator bent on showing off and scaring his American quarry.

The common mistake of designating the *Finback* as an F-8 instead of the correct J-8 is, unfortunately, perpetuated. This error led to occasional confusion in the media during the two-week crisis, one CNN anchor demanding of an Army general why the Chinese had been allowed to get F-8s. The young reporter obviously thought the F-8 in question was the F-8 *Crusader* of Vietnam fame.

Lt. Osborn also gives first-time public confirmation that the flight crew completed the destruct plan to disable their valuable intelligence-gathering sensors and systems. As he and his crew realized they would be staying with their Chinese hosts for a while, Osborn developed a game plan. They determined what their individual and collective roles would be and resolved to hang together as a unit.

Writing in the first person, Osborn gives a lot of space to his particular experiences, especially as he was initially separated from his group when the Chinese realized his senior position and the fact the crew looked to him for leadership. Fortunately, the other officers and the senior chief flight engineer quickly exercised their own leadership skills in Osborn's absence, and soon the 23 other members had formed their manner of dealing with the Chinese. As Senior Chief Nick Mellos said, "Don't get lazy around the guards. We might still be here a long time. This detention crap can be drawn out much longer than any of us want. But we're Americans, and we're sailors. So we'll watch what we say and what we do." It was excellent advice from an old hand who was as much responsible for the successful return of everyone as Lt. Osborn and his other officers.

These are good books, although I question the legitimacy of issuing two editions. I saw nothing in the adult version that today's younger readers couldn't have

Save the Vengeance

In December 2001 an organization was formed to secure the future of the last surviving WW II British aircraft carrier. "Save the Vengeance" is attempting to acquire the historic ship from the Brazilian navy, her last operator and current owner.

Initially built as a *Colossus*-class light fleet carrier, the ship was commissioned HMS *Vengeance* for the Royal Navy in 1944. Following service during WW II, she went on loan to the Australian navy from 1952 to 1955 as HMAS *Vengeance*. Later, the ship was sold to the Brazilian navy, refitted and commissioned NAeL *Minas Gerais* in 1960, serving until decommissioned in October 2001.

The organization's goal is to acquire the carrier, return her to the United Kingdom and transform her into a museum to educate the public on the development of aircraft carriers and their role in history. If this project is successful, *Vengeance* will be the only preserved aircraft carrier in Europe. For more information, go to www.fleetairmarchive.net/vengeance.

Reunions

EAA AirVenture, 23–29 JUL, Oshkosh, WI. POC: Dick Knapinski, 920-426-6523; dknapinski@eaa.org; www.airventure.org.

Ranger (CVA/CV 61), 24–28 JUL, Chicago, IL. POC: George Meoli, gmeoli@erols.com.

RVAH-12, 26–28 JUL, Pensacola, FL. POC: Rod Anderson, 734-475-5898; rod.anderson@veridian.com; http://members.tripod.com/rvah12_naskeywest/index.htm.

Bon Homme Richard (CV/CVA 31), 9–10 AUG, Charleston, SC. POC: Ron Edlund, 231-773-0441.

America (CV 66), 14–17 AUG, Charleston, SC. POC: Ed Pelletier, 888-391-CV66; angels66@aol.com; www.ussamerica.org.

Enterprise (CVA/CVN 65), 27–31 AUG, Pittsburgh, PA. POC: Walter McDougall, 724-325-9954; mcdou@alltel.net.

VC-12/VAW-12, SEP 2002, Newport, RI. POC: Edward Seykowski, 219-462-3636; edseykow@juno.com.

Iwo Jima (LPH 2/LHD 7), 5–8 SEP, Everett, WA. POC: Robert McAnally, 757-723-0317; yujack@megalink.net.

Salisbury Sound (AV 13), 12–14 SEP, Virginia Beach, VA. POC: Marian Bruce, 505-293-3841; brubru@nm.net.

VC-35/VA(AW)-35, 18–21 SEP, Albuquerque, NM. POC: William Martin, 505-864-7953; houdiniesc@aol.com.

Tripoli (CVE 64), 18–22 SEP, Hot Springs, AK. POC: Jim Metts, 409-722-1468; jrmetts@ih2000.net; www.geocities.com/pentagon/5871.

Saginaw Bay (CVE 82), 20–24 SEP, Arlington, VA. POC: Rita Homman, 740-654-1651; ejhoman@juno.com.

Wright (AV 1/AG 79/CVL 49), 22–26 SEP, Charleston, SC. POC: Ed Harvey, 229-872-3940; edgin@caironet.com.

NAS/NOB Trinidad, 26–28 SEP, Memphis, TN. POC: F. D. Barrett, 870-496-2285; barrett@ozarkisp.net.

WW II Navy Scouting Squadrons, 27–30 SEP, Corpus Christi, TX. POC: Leon Hance, 361-780-5419; w4yfz@dbstech.com.

Essex (CV/CVA/CVS 9/LHD 2), 30 SEP–6 OCT, New Orleans, LA. POC: C. Leonard Schlamp, 812-437-9485; clschlamp@juno.com.

ANA PHOTO CONTEST

PH1 Jim Hampshire won the bimonthly photo contest with this spectacular shot of a Special Purpose Insertion/Extraction team suspended above *John F. Kennedy* (CV 67).

For contest details call 703-960-2490. Mail photos to ANA, 2550 Huntington Ave., Suite 201, Alexandria, VA 22303-1499; email zip@anahq.org.

Cash Awards:
Bimonthly—\$100.
Annual—First, \$350;

