

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

Toperczer, Istvan. *MiG-17 and MiG-19 Units of the Vietnam War*. Osprey Publishing Ltd., 443 Park Ave. S., New York, NY 10016. 2001. 96 pp. Ill. \$18.95.

Number 25 of the popular Combat Aircraft series from Osprey, this book will shed new light and open new questions on the shadowy history of the Vietnam People's Air Force (VPAF). Beginning with a history of the early formation of the VPAF, the author, a flight surgeon in the Hungarian Air Force, tells of North Vietnam's first pilot training and aircraft. We reviewed his large-format book, *Air War Over North Viet Nam*, an all-inclusive history of the VPAF 1949–1977, when it was published by Squadron/Signal in 1998.

Of course, the main focus of the new book is the Vietnam air war, and it is in this area that knowledgeable readers will be the most interested, and the most critical. It's plain that Dr. Toperczer has included a lot of propaganda, maybe in exchange for having gained such widespread admission to North Vietnamese pilots, files and photos. However, he does try to walk a tight line to ensure a true history.

The photos and color profiles are quite interesting. Some are repeated from the early Squadron/Signal book, while others are new and add to the book's appeal. Iain Wyllie's cover painting is also typically well done. Included are general-arrangement aircraft drawings and several short appendices showing units' facts and kill claims against the American Navy and Air Force. Perhaps the full story of these encounters will never be written. The information on both sides is often unclear and conflicting. For instance, describing the loss of the Attack Squadron 212 A-4E flown by Ltjg. Al Crebo in April 1967, the author counters the U.S. claim that the *Skyhawk* was hit by a missile. This loss is one of the most well-photographed combat air actions of the early war, documented by stunning pictures of Crebo's mortally wounded aircraft as he struggles to return to his carrier. (Douglas Aircraft and designer Ed Heinemann sure built 'em tough!) Ultimately, he ejected and was rescued.

The author writes that Crebo's A-4 was hit by MiGs, and he even offers the name of the VPAF flight leader. In 1982, I received a letter from a man who was flying Crebo's wing en route back to the carrier, *Bon Homme Richard* (CVA 31). Stephen R. Gray maintained the damage came from an SA-2 missile. There are other instances of either confusion or lack of facts, again for both sides, and if nothing else it leaves room for research and discussion.

In the meantime, this new volume is an excellent addition to literature on the air war in Southeast Asia.

McWhorter, Hamilton III, Cdr. USN (Ret.) with Jay A. Stout. *The First Hellcat Ace*. Pacifica Military History, 1149 Grand Teton Dr., Pacifica, CA 94044. 2001. 213 pp. Ill. \$29.95.

A good, traditional WW II memoir, this book describes the author's early life in Georgia, enlistment in the Navy before Pearl Harbor and flight training. It then moves on to his first combat experience as a participant in Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942, and subsequent tours in the Pacific. As a member of one of the first *Hellcat* squadrons, McWhorter became the first F6F ace and eventually the first double ace in *Hellcats*, ending up with 12 victories over Japanese aircraft. He earned the moniker "One-Slug McWhorter" because of his economical shooting.

Ham McWhorter saw considerable action in many of the Pacific war's major campaigns, including Truk, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. His coauthor, a Marine F/A-18 *Hornet* aviator, also has a well-received wartime autobiography to his credit, *Hornets Over Kuwait* (USNI, 1997), which we reviewed in this column.

Throughout the book, there are defining moments of combat and personal milestones, especially McWhorter's marriage. There is also the theme of young aviators desperately trying to survive flying combat from carriers as they watch many of their friends fall. Besides the unique aspect of being written by a successful ace, this book's main appeal is describing how young men dealt with combat and personal loss.

Pacifica has published a few similar memoirs, including *The Jolly Rogers* (1997, Orion 1989), F4U Corsair ace Tom Blackburn's description of combat, and *Above and Beyond* (1997) by Charles Patrick Weiland, a Marine F4U carrier aviator.

Atkins, Edward. *Flight Deck: A Pictorial Essay of a Day in the Life of an Airdale*. Ship-n-Planes Publishing Co., PO Box 59652, Potomac, MD 20859. 2001. 766 pp. Ill. \$85.65.

The author produced this book primarily for himself and his family to preserve his experiences during WW II aboard the carrier *Antietam* (CV 36), which did not reach combat. The large paperback includes commentary and photos, some of which readers may not have seen before. *Flight Deck* is typical of self-published books, which are usually written for posterity rather than marketability. It is available solely through Atkins' website at www.ship-n-planes.com.