

# PROFESSIONAL READING

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

Ewing, Steve. *Reaper Leader: The Life of Jimmy Flatley*. Naval Institute Press, 291 Wood Rd., Annapolis, MD 21402-5034. 2002. 384 pp. Ill. \$36.95.

Jimmy Flatley had far-reaching influence over Naval Aviation before America's entry into WW II and until his untimely death in 1958. Yet, there has been little written about this "giant," who stood barely five feet, six inches tall. Flatley saw action in such important engagements as Coral Sea, Guadalcanal and Leyte, but whatever has been previously written about his role in these campaigns says little about the man. Steve Ewing has addressed this omission by writing an admiring but factual biography that places its subject well within historical and personal perspectives. With access to family records, correspondence and surviving veterans who knew and flew with Flatley, the book is crammed with little-known historical tidbits that bring to life the story of one of this country's premier aviators.

The opening chapter deals with Flatley's boyhood and experiences at the Naval Academy, where he quickly established himself as a free spirit. Excellent descriptions of Flatley's early aviation assignments and his struggles to mature and accumulate leadership knowledge give substance to the book and bring the reader into the arena of prewar Naval Aviation.

Although Flatley was a fighter pilot, it's interesting to learn that an early squadron assignment found him with VP-4F, flying Douglas PDs and Consolidated P2Ys. In December 1941 he was with VF-2 flying the Brewster F2A, the Navy's first monoplane fighter. Throughout all of these stories and experiences, the author builds his theme of Flatley as a naval leader, both in the air and on the ground.

As XO of VF-42 in the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942, he was frustrated by the lack of American fighters and control from the ship. He was not overly impressed by the Zero, the main Japanese naval fighter, but noted the high quality of Japanese pilots. His writeup on enemy capabilities received high marks at senior levels.

After Coral Sea, he was ordered to form VF-10, flying F4F Wildcats. Named the *Grim Reapers*, as CO, Flatley became "Reaper Leader." There were successes at Guadalcanal, but several losses which left him frustrated. Following his tour as Commander Air Group 5 on board *Yorktown* (CV 10), during which he helped introduce Grumman's F6F Hellcat to combat in August 1943, Flatley never flew combat again. But he had seen enough to help train many younger aviators. He received a commendation for his bravery in retrieving wounded personnel after his carrier *Bunker Hill* (CV 17) was hit by kamikazes on 11 May 1945.



James H. Flatley, Jr., poses with his two-year-old son, James III, who is perched on the wing of an F4B in Hawaii in 1936.

Flatley sat out the Korean War as CO of NAS Olathe, Kans., where the field was eventually named in his honor. After commanding *Block Island* (CVE 106) for a year, Flatley became deeply involved with assessing Naval Aviation's disastrous safety record and ultimately helped develop the Naval Aviation Safety Center, today's Naval Safety Center. He next commanded NAS Norfolk, Va., followed by *Lake Champlain* (CVA 39). In July 1957, he was selected for rear admiral.

The author covers Flatley's late career highlights, including family and professional developments, which were cut short by a diagnosis of cancer. Shortly before his death a year later, he received word of his promotion to vice admiral.

There's a lot in this biography, including an unusual chapter near the end which assesses Flatley's strong points using the contemporary officer fitness report as the framework. This in-depth evaluation of Jimmy Flatley's makeup and accomplishments makes for entertaining and insightful reading. In this fascinating book, Ewing has chronicled the life of an important, though little-known personality who gave so much to his country and his profession.

Sauter, Jack. *USS Lake Champlain, CV/CVA/CVS-39*. Turner Publications, PO Box 3101, Paducah, KY 42002-3101. 120 pp. Ill. \$53.50.

Although written for and by "Champ" crewmen, this nostalgic review of one of the stalwarts of the 1950s carrier fleet should be welcomed by anyone with an interest in Naval Aviation. Introductory chapters give resumes of Naval Aviation history and the story of *Lake Champlain*, supported by photos that include several excellent views of aircraft and people. Crew letters and experiences are incorporated into the text, giving dramatic color to the overall narrative. An alumni photo and biography section, similar to a high school yearbook, rounds out this attractive volume.