

PROFESSIONAL READING

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

Carroll, Ward. *Punk's Fight*. New American Library, 375 Hudson St., New York, NY 10014. 2004. \$6.99.

Arguably the best of the “Punk trilogy,” this latest effort by Ward Carroll offers the reader an unusual tale that begins with a traditional Naval Aviation story, but soon changes settings. In the first two novels, *Punk's War* and *Punk's Wing*, we met “Punk” Reichert as a frustrated lieutenant who negotiates his way through the agony-and-ecstasy existence aboard ship, dealing with the various personalities in his squadron and air wing and delighting in flying his F-14 Tomcat. Then he serves an instructor tour with the fleet readiness squadron at NAS Oceana, Va., setting the scene for this third book, which now has him a lieutenant commander with a squadron flying missions over Afghanistan.

The action starts in the first few pages when the squadron CO and air wing commander die in a crash, allowing Punk's friend, Spud, to fleet up to skipper. One of Punk's nemeses, a CO from his earlier tour, makes his way back as the deputy air wing commander and they immediately butt heads. Besides the expected personality conflicts and missions over the beach, Carroll accurately conveys the long periods of boring “commutes” to the target, salted with labyrinthine communication sequences with controlling agencies and occasionally dense controllers. Eventually, Punk and Spud eject over the rugged Afghanistan mountains and have to endure capture, torture and other unexpected involvement in this conflict.

Carroll has obviously done a lot of commendable research in unknown areas—special operations, cultural points of interest and language, personal weapons and strategy—and has carried off an exciting tale of Naval Aviators at war in a foreign land.

Thomas, Andrew. *Hurricane Aces 1941–45*. Osprey, MBI Publishing, 729 Prospect Ave., PO Box 1, Osceola, WI 54020. 2004. 96 pp. Ill. \$19.95.

Most American readers know the Hawker Hurricane from its role in the Battle of Britain in 1940. Certainly its role in that legendary campaign has assured its place in history. However, after the Germans gave up on daylight assault, the Hurricane found further employment in other theaters, even flying from Royal Navy carriers.

Andrew Thomas, an RAF historian of considerable talents, has taken up the Hurricane's story after the Battle of Britain and assembled an admirable collection of photos and experiences that should fill in many blank pages, at least on this side of the “pond.” We also reviewed Thomas' book on Gloster Gladiator aces, a somewhat esoteric aircraft type that nonetheless saw its fair share of action across the globe. His latest book is no less welcome, appearing as Number 57 in Osprey's highly

successful aces series.

Thomas' broad scope includes combat in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, the last of which has not been covered well. A few of the hard-pressed RAF squadrons in Ceylon, Java and Burma traded their Brewster Buffalos for Hurricanes and gave good accounts of themselves fighting against the seemingly unstoppable Japanese.

Veteran profile artist John Weal's work is as good as ever, displaying the Hawker fighter's classic bulky lines with a wide variety of markings and color. These books continue to offer great value for the money, combining hard-to-find information, photos and stunning artwork on the cover and in the folio of profiles.

Mutza, Wayne. *The A-1 Skyraider in Vietnam: The Spad's Last War*. Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 4880 Lower Valley Rd., Atglen, PA 19310. 2003. 216 pp. Ill. \$49.95.

Presented in the familiar large format of the publisher, Wayne Mutza's latest book is an impressive collection of photos, facts and personal experiences describing one of America's most enduring military aircraft and its last combat actions. The text is informative and well written, and there is an interesting series of tables and rosters in the appendices that briefly give the career of each Skyraider and its bureau or serial number. Other entries include Spad patches and insignia and individual pilots. Surprisingly, the author's bibliography does not include anything from *Naval Aviation News* or the book by Zip Rausa (*Skyraider, The A-1 Flying Dump Truck*, Nautical & Aviation Publishing, 1982, 2001). Rausa flew the A-1 on the Spad's last single-seater combat cruise, knew the plane's designer Ed Heinemann well, and was editor of *Naval Aviation News*.

Mutza describes the Skyraider's service in the Navy, Air Force and South Vietnamese air force, supplementing facts with colorful experiences. I've read accounts of Major Bernie Fisher's Medal of Honor rescue of a fellow pilot, but this particular rendition is one of the best and most complete. The mission of another USAF A-1 pilot and Medal of Honor recipient, Lieutenant Colonel William A. Jones III, is also included.

The first official American involvement in the war in Southeast Asia occurred during the Gulf of Tonkin incidents of August 1964. U.S. retaliation included A-1 squadrons, and for the next four years the Skyraider flew missions from large and small carriers. The powerful, but slow A-1 fell victim to enemy flak, and several Navy A-1 pilots were killed in action.

By spring 1968, the single-seat A-1 had been withdrawn from frontline Navy squadrons, and was soon followed by the last multiseat EA-1Es. However, the Skyraider continued to fly combat with the American and

South Vietnamese air forces, seeing considerable action, especially as a search-and-rescue aircraft.

It's all here in this highly readable book.

Cressman, Robert J. *USS Ranger: The Navy's First Flattop from Keel to Mast*. Brassey's, Inc., 22841 Quicksilver Dr., Dulles, VA 20166. 2003. 451 pp. Ill. \$39.95.

The only ship of its class, and the "runt of the litter" of Navy WW II carriers, *Ranger* (CV 4) had a limited combat career. Thus, it would seem that this ship might not warrant such a large book. However, when the author is an experienced historian and researcher who presents us with such an in-depth, well-documented and well-illustrated work, it is impossible to dismiss the subject as unworthy. Regular readers of this column know how much importance I place on well-chosen and unusual photographs as part of the entire package a book presents, and this large-format book has a nice selection of just what I mean. The prewar photos are fascinating, showing a variety of aircraft, most of which were gone by 1941, although a few lingered to see action in the early months.



Bob Cressman, a naval historian and author in the Naval Historical Center.

Cressman describes the design and construction of the ship as the first purpose-built carrier in the U.S. Navy. Preceding carriers had begun as other types, such as battle cruisers. As he details *Ranger's* prewar years, the author also includes the myriad mishaps that dogged the carrier's aircrews. Even as we approach the end of the narrative and the ship's service in 1946, there sometimes seems to be almost daily crashes, planes over the side or into the catwalk, and pilots and crewmen lost or just barely rescued.

As dangerous as carrier aviation has always been, today's generation cannot know how truly bad it was out there without the established safety programs and no-nonsense attitudes regarding flight procedures we take for granted today. In the modern Navy, such a number of mishaps and fatalities would result in the relief of the squadron and air wing commanders, and probably the ship's CO. I have never seen such an accounting of pre-Naval Air Training and Operating Procedures Standardization and pre-Naval Safety Center aviation mishaps as recorded in this book. It is sobering.

Another eye opener is the realization that there were so many ensigns and jaygees in the squadrons. Today's squadrons have few of these very junior officers, because by the time one finishes fleet readiness squadron training and joins the first fleet squadron, the newly winged aviator is already approaching promotion to O-3. But in 1942, most aviators did not receive their commissions until they also got their wings, and the time from ensign to jaygee was more than two years.

Pearl Harbor found *Ranger* conducting training in the Atlantic and being eyed by the British as a ferry to bring much needed aircraft to Europe. The U.S. Navy wasn't anxious to have an expensive carrier used in such a manner, and eventually sent the small ship to North Africa. *Ranger's* main claim to fame is her participation in Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942. There have been other accounts of Naval Aviation in this action, but this author has given us an almost minute-by-minute log of the crews involved, by flight, squadron and individual aircraft. He has delved into ship logs and reports in a manner that immediately indicates the eye and dedication of a historian who knows his subject. He also describes the limited action in October 1943 when *Ranger's* crews attacked German installations and shipping near Bodo, Norway—one of the few times when an American fleet carrier saw action against the European side of the Axis.

All in all, this is a fine biography of an important, but little known ship and its dedicated flight crews.

Scutts, Jerry. *PBJ Mitchell Units of the Pacific War*.

Osprey, MBI Publishing, 729 Prospect Ave., PO Box 1, Osceola, WI 54020. 2004. 96 pp. Ill. \$19.95.

North American's fabled "Tokyo Raider" bomber has never suffered from lack of historical exposure. Books and articles about the B-25 are plentiful. However, until recently, the naval career of the Mitchell was relatively unknown, except as occasional footnotes and inclusions in larger histories. But now Jerry Scutts has written his second book on Marine Corps PBJs (B-25s) as part of Osprey's popular Combat Aircraft series. (See Scutts' *Marine Mitchells*, Phalanx, 1993; and Alan C. Carey's *Leatherneck Bombers*, Schiffer, 2002.)

The stellar cover by Mark Postlethwaite is one of the best I have seen in the Osprey lineup. You do have to look at the illustration a few times to avoid dismissing it as simply a silhouette. It depicts a PBJ of VMB-611 on a night mission illuminated by Japanese searchlights. The modeling of the darkly painted PBJ is quite impressive.

Jim Laurier's profiles are expectedly well done, although by the author's own admission, the bland Marine Corps Mitchells were devoid of all but the basic markings and tentative personal embellishments, such as mission scoreboards. Thus, a folio of 24 drawings inside and one on the back cover gets a little monotonous.

The text is well researched and details the experiences of the crews of the VMBs that took the PBJ to war supporting the last campaigns, including Saipan to Okinawa. Many Mitchells and their crews were lost as they made their runs over targets, and their stories of courage and sacrifice in the last 18 months of the Pacific war make good reading. Number 40 in this open-ended series, the new book joins the others as a good value for the money, and people with interests in U.S. Marine Corps aviation should definitely add it to their libraries.