

# PROFESSIONAL READING

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

**Reed, Robert T. *Lost Black Sheep: The Search for WWII Ace Chris Magee.*** Hellgate Press/PSI Research, Central Point, OR 97502. 2001. 246 pp. Ill. \$24.95.

Chris Magee flew Corsairs with Pappy Boyington's "Black Sheep" of VMF-214 and with nine kills, was second only to Pappy as the squadron's top ace. In a well-known photo, Magee is shown posing with Boyington on the CO's F4U while trading playing cards stamped with the Rising Sun insignia for several baseball caps. The setup was to publicize the St. Louis Cardinals' offer of a cap for every Japanese plane shot down.

The author is the son of Chris Magee, a fact that he discovered later in life. This well-done biography takes Magee's life from the beginning in Chicago and his desire to fly combat before the United States entered WW II and beyond. He was so anxious that he went to Canada and trained with the Royal Canadian Air Force, only to come home after the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and join the Marine Corps. His wartime service, for which he received the Navy Cross, is well chronicled.

Magee left the Corps in October 1945. Three years later, he was in Israel fighting for that new country's independence as one of its first fighter pilots. He flew the Avia S-199, a bastardized Messerschmitt 109 with a bomber engine that produced massive torque and an unforgiving nature.

Chris Magee had trouble finding himself after his military service, and he ended up on the wrong side of the law, eventually going to prison after a series of bank robberies—a huge downfall for such a colorful hero.

How the author discovered his father and joined the "Black Sheep" family is an important part of this book. This small volume is a good source of information about VMF-214 as Reed had help from many of the surviving members.

**Wildenberg, Thomas. *All the Factors of Victory: Adm. Joseph Mason Reeves and the Origins of Carrier Airpower.*** Brassey's, Inc., 22841 Quicksilver Dr., Dulles, VA 20166. 2003. 326 pp. Ill. \$27.50.

Bill Reeves is one of those seminal, but shadowy figures of Naval Aviation. The face on the dust jacket that stares back at the reader might be a familiar, but unknown visage sporting a neatly trimmed white goatee and moustache. In the black-and-white photograph, the officer appears as a rear admiral with two rows of the large ribbons of pre-Vietnam style and what might be mistaken for the wings of a Naval Aviator. In reality, the wings are silver, not gold, and represent his designation as a naval aviation observer, not a pilot. He

sometimes shows up in various period photos, and was even portrayed in the 1945 Gary Cooper film *Task Force*.

The author of this heavily researched biography has produced an account of an era that is seldom discussed. The United States had mostly given up its tenuous leadership in military aviation shortly after the Wright Brothers' first flight, and it would not regain that position until the middle of WW II. In the intervening 40 years, Naval Aviation had come about through British persistence in developing the aircraft carrier and using it in the last years of WW I. Every major nation took note of British experiences and soon several other countries were planning air-capable ships. America was certainly in on this important development, but was held back by the traditional turf-guarding of surface-ship admirals. The carrier was initially limited in the United States to one converted collier, *Langley* (CV 1).

Young Joe Reeves had graduated from the Naval Academy and established himself as a superb engineering and gunnery officer. He had seen combat and acquitted himself well during the Battle of Santiago in the Spanish-American War of 1898. Working his way up the promotion ladder during a time when officers sat for examination to be promoted, Reeves showed his unique abilities time and again, and found himself at Naval Aviation's doorstep.

He was fully engaged in the mid-1920s developing tactics and operational procedures. The author describes this important but little-known period, including new aircraft like the Boeing and Curtiss fighters of the time. In June 1927, Reeves became the first "aviator" to become a flag officer and by 1933 he was wearing four stars. Oddly, his career seems to have been complete by the time America entered WW II, although he answered a recall and served in a variety of staff and committee positions.

Like many senior naval officers of his generation, Reeves took a flight course that, while not training him to actually pilot aircraft, gave him a solid appreciation of the skills required to fly, particularly from a carrier's flight deck. He threw himself into the role of champion for this new "weapon system."

Wildenberg's detailed text is a compendium of the turn-of-the-century Navy that will be of interest to a wider audience. Reeves quickly showed himself to be a highly capable tinkerer and designer. He was always trying to better the equipment with which he was involved, and was also a good leader who looked after his men. I highly recommend this look at one of Naval Aviation's most important personalities.