

# PROFESSIONAL READING

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

Sherwood, John Darrell. *Afterburner: Naval Aviators and the Vietnam War*. NYU Press, 838 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10003-4812. 2004. 351 pp. Ill. \$32.95.

A historian with the Naval Historical Center, this author has produced a well-written book describing the experiences of the crews that went to war in Southeast Asia. In a brief introduction, he sums up the Vietnam air war before 1970, describing how the unrealized hope of Rolling Thunder against the North Vietnamese fed the United States' frustration in the years between 1964 and 1970.

The narrative offers glimpses into seldom-described cruises like the 1970 deployment of *Shangri-La* (CVS 38), which was beset with mechanical and morale problems. Most histories ignore the old ship's combat cruise in this "dull" period. Yet, there was action and men fought and died.

An unusual theme is the history and experience of the Naval Flight Officer (NFO), an important part of the crew of many of the Navy's front-line combat aircraft, such as the F-4 Phantom, A-6 Intruder, and



Above, Dr. John Sherwood, a historian with the Naval Historical Center, describes the Vietnam air war in *Afterburner*. Below, Naval Flight Officers flew in Navy combat aircraft, such as this VF-32 F-4 Phantom II, during the war.

RA-5C Vigilante. The complex systems in these aircraft required an NFO to fly with the pilot. The description of the evolution of the NFO also includes some pilots' initial resentment about sharing the cockpit with a second officer who often directed the mission in the heat of combat. A lengthy account of a MiG engagement in October 1967 highlights the role of the NFO, and the development of Basic Naval Aviation Officer School, or "banana school," as it was affectionately called, rounds out the subject. I can't recall a book that has described the experience of NFOs in this detail.

A chapter on prisoners of war includes a lengthy description that brings the reader inside the Hanoi Hilton. It's a heroic account of how the prisoners got through the horrors of their internment, helping each other and resisting the inhumane treatment by their captors.

The author also writes about the unusual experience of VMA(AW)-224, flying A-6s from *Coral Sea* (CV 43) in 1972. This story is one that has not been described elsewhere, except in passing. As the first Marine carrier



squadron in the war since 1965, the *Bengals* had their operational and personnel problems. I was surprised that the author named names, but the facts are true, and his account is fair. It's a rare, unusual look at Marine Corps air operations during Vietnam.

*Afterburner* resuscitates the old controversy as to who was the pilot of the third MiG that Randy Cunningham and Bill Driscoll of VF-96 shot down on 10 May 1972. For years, the North Vietnamese pilot was touted to be their top ace, "Colonel Tomb." More recent research and analysis has denied that claim, along with the assertion that Tomb had shot down 13 American aircraft. Now, in a seemingly innocuously placed footnote, the author says, "not so fast." Apparently, there was a Major Ton with 10 kills, and the author's research and contacts with various sources now leaves considerable room for further discussion.

There are a few errors in the text, such as assigning Cal Swanson to VF-163 instead of VF-162 on page 98, and on page 234, the RIO is referred to as a "radio intercept officer." The photo selection is also rather sparse but adequate for this otherwise very well done account of the naval air war in Vietnam.

Collier, Peter and del Calzo, Nick. *Medal of Honor: Portraits of Valor Beyond the Call of Duty*. Artisan, 703 Broadway, New York, NY 10003-9555. 2003. 253 pp. Ill. \$40.

There have been several books on America's highest military award in recent years. This book appeared with more than the average hype—perhaps with good reason given the "big" names associated with it. With a foreword by George H. W. Bush and introductory essays by Senator John McCain and reporter Tom Brokaw, this collection of stories about Medal of Honor (MOH) recipients is a high-end product. Although its format and size don't make for comfortable reading, the book is well done and takes advantage of meaningful photography and layout. Its hook is that the 116 men whose accounts make up the bulk of the narrative were living at the time of writing.

The stories are stirring and describe how average men of all backgrounds found themselves in incredible situations and rose to the challenge. One criterion for receiving the Medal of Honor is that if the individual had not performed in such a manner, it would not have reflected badly on him. All these men's missions stand

out under this requirement—rescuing friends under intense fire while badly wounded themselves, picking up burning flares in a mortally damaged aircraft, throwing themselves on live grenades, returning to the fight against enemy aircraft even though low on fuel and facing superior numbers.

Although there are a few aviation stories here, the only Vietnam Naval Aviator included is Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale, who received the MOH for his unwavering eight-year stand against North Vietnamese jailers. Three other Naval Aviators of the Vietnam War who received the medal—Raymond Claussen, Jr., Michael Estocin and Stephen Pless—are deceased, and thus are not part of the scope of the book's coverage. A few WW II Navy and Marine Corps aviators are part of the book.

The layout includes photos of the men as they appeared during their active duty time, juxtaposed with a much larger picture showing each recipient as he is today. The faces are fuller, some of the men are confined to wheelchairs, a few have patches over one eye, and some are wearing their uniforms complete with impressive displays of ribbons.

Each older man's portrait shows the determination and strength of spirit that enabled him to succeed in his mission.

All in all, this book is a nice tribute to American fortitude and what military service means. Prepare to be moved as you leaf through the pages.

Long, Cdr. Billy Jack, USNR (Ret). *Curtiss SC-1/2 Seahawk*. Ginter Books, 1754 Warfield Circle, Simi Valley, CA 93063. 2004. 129 pp. Ill. \$29.95.

The last American observation floatplane, the Seahawk, has received little exposure. An esoteric type, it saw short combat service at the very end of the Pacific war, and only served into the late 1940s before its mission was overtaken by progress in helicopters and changes in operational requirements. Nonetheless, Curtiss' tough-looking floatplane comes off well in this new volume in Steve Ginter's established line.

Written by a former SC pilot, the book is a modeler's dream, with a pleasing array of photos and examples of pages from the plane's manuals. The author includes a brief history of pilot training and a few reminiscences from his days flying the SC-1 off Japan.

This book is highly recommended for an unexpected look at an unusual, but evocative, type that just missed major combat.



*Afterburner* describes American pilots' encounters with North Vietnamese aircraft, like these MiG-17s at Phuc Yen airfield northwest of Hanoi. USAF photo.