

PROFESSIONAL READING

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

Wetterhahn, Ralph. *The Last Flight of Bomber 31: Harrowing Tales of American and Japanese Pilots Who Fought in WWII's Arctic Air Campaign*. Carroll & Graf, 245 West 17th St., 11th Floor, New York, NY 10011. 2004. 357 pp. Ill. \$26.00.

The year-long Aleutians Campaign began in June 1942 as a diversionary measure by the Japanese to focus American attention away from their main operation, the invasion of Midway Atoll. While the Midway battle was a short, bloody affair lasting little more than four days, the fighting in the Aleutians was a costly, year-long, drawn-out series of encounters that many Americans at the time did not realize was taking place on their nation's far northwestern doorstep. But American flight crews and ground troops were fighting and dying in some of the most inhospitable places the planet had to offer, facing a lack of supplies and terrible cold, wet weather and terrain in the Aleutians. Even after the last Japanese vacated the area in mid-1943, Navy and Army Air Forces air crews flew long, often terrifying, missions against the most northerly of the Emperor's facilities.

The author is a retired Air Force colonel whose operational experience includes 180 missions in Vietnam as an F-4 Phantom pilot and as an exchange aviator flying the A-7E Corsair with VA-146, as well as a MiG-21 kill in January 1967 as part of the famous Operation Bolo. His considerable combat experience, training in mishap investigation, and demonstrated success as an aviation writer has equipped Wetterhahn to produce a colorful, fascinating book.

Little has been written about the PV-1 Ventura and PV-2 Harpoon medium bombers, with the recent exception of a volume in Osprey's Combat Aircraft series by Alan C. Carey, which we reviewed in this column. Carey mentions the loss of Bombing Squadron (VB) 139's Bomber 31 but devotes only a few paragraphs to this doomed crew. Thus, it remains for Wetterhahn to tell the full story, which he does with considerable skill. He has accumulated a lot of details and stories as a buildup to the main subject of the bombing campaign flown by the PV squadrons.

During one harrowing flight on 25 March 1944, VB-139's Bomber 31 and its six-man crew commanded by Lt. Walt Whitman did not return from a mission. The remains of their aircraft, including four bodies, were



Above and left, members of VB-139 flew PV-1 Venturas against the Japanese in the Kurile Islands, in what became known as the "Empire Express."



discovered by Soviet inspectors in 1962 in the desolate mountains of the Kamchatka peninsula. The specifics of the site were not released for nearly 40 years, and only recently have American investigators, including Col. Wetterhahn, been able to see the Ventura's final resting place first hand.

Besides describing the last mission of this particular crew, he also describes the agonizing, desperate flights made by American and Japanese crews, supported by several appendices and notes. The book is chock-full of combat descriptions of the tough little war, with sections of Venturas fighting the weather and Japanese flak and Oscar and Zeke interceptors. The VB squadrons were part of the Empire Express, which flew against the Japanese in an effort to divert Imperial supplies and men from supporting the resistance to the upcoming invasion of the Philippines. There are also many accounts of the Army B-24 and B-25 crews that partnered the operation with the Navy.

It's a terrific story, well told and supported with numerous interesting photos of Venturas and Harpoons in the Arctic desolation that formed the stage for the drama played out nearly every day for two years. Highly recommended reading.

McGaugh, Scott. *Midway Magic: An Oral History of America's Legendary Aircraft Carrier*. CDS, 425 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10017. 2004. 256 pp. Ill. \$24.95.

This book covers a dramatic subject and the writing is good, particularly when the author describes the experiences of the people involved. But his technical knowledge is lacking, and when he gets into the lingo of Naval Aviation he has trouble and could have used an editor who knew the subject. However, he does have the subject at heart as he writes about the crew's experiences. The narrative is unusual in the depth to which it delves into *Midway* (CVB/CVA/CV 41) sailors' individual personalities, making the book not so much a history of the ship as of her many crewmen.

The story becomes a listing of problems belying the "Midway Magic" sobriquet. The narrative describes *Midway's* participation in post-World War II rocket testing, including launching a captured German V-2, which resulted in a damaged flight deck. The middle portion of the book is dedicated to the ship's eventful 1972–1973 cruise which, after an action-filled 1965 combat cruise and a lengthy overhaul, was the carrier's only other Vietnam deployment. As the war intensified, *Midway* sent crews against North Vietnamese targets and MiGs, losing aircraft and men.

There is a brief description of the 1975 cruise and the fall of Saigon, including the hurried evacuation of South Vietnam's capital and the major role *Midway* played in rescuing the desperate refugees. It's one of the better sections, understandably crammed with emotion as the last group of South Vietnamese comes across the carrier's flight deck. Post-Vietnam sections describe late Cold War confrontations with the Soviet Union, some of which are quite dramatic.

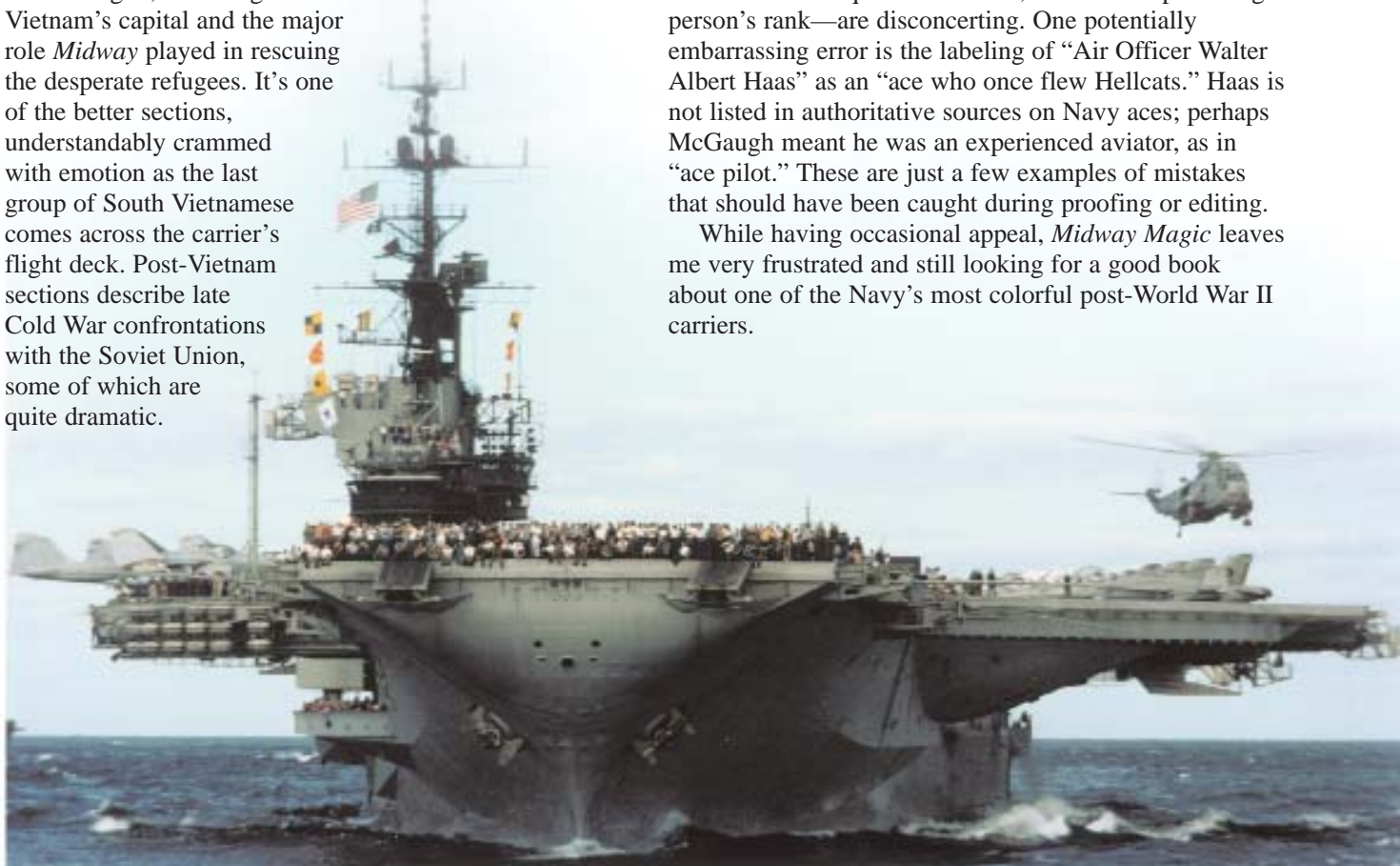
Pursuits ashore, especially in the Philippines, will bring back smiles, shudders and nods from many veterans. The author addresses *Midway's* fabled "rock and roll" propensities, which reached major concern in the late 1980s with the installation of large bow blisters that exacerbated rather than reduced the problem. As the carrier rode out a typhoon in 1989, she rolled so drastically that each side of the flight deck was engulfed by the turbulent seas. Final analysis indicated the roll had been 24 degrees. The description of *Midway's* role in the first Gulf War is rather brief and gives little of the air wing's experience or individual crews' missions.

The best military books balance the human aspects with those concerning the hardware, which is, after all, operated by the people. This author does not strike this balance, an omission which gives an uneven text and consistently displays his lack of subject knowledge. He often resorts to cutesy phrasing that hampers the narrative's flow, for example, stating that "air wings were grounded about seven-eighths of the time." What a strange fraction.

Unfortunately, the mistakes which abound in this book hindered my enjoyment. The ship is occasionally referred to as the Navy's 41st carrier, which it was not, and planes are often misidentified and terminology misused. Some odd style choices—not italicizing ship names; using the British form of squadron address; and seldom providing a person's rank—are disconcerting. One potentially embarrassing error is the labeling of "Air Officer Walter Albert Haas" as an "ace who once flew Hellcats." Haas is not listed in authoritative sources on Navy aces; perhaps McGaugh meant he was an experienced aviator, as in "ace pilot." These are just a few examples of mistakes that should have been caught during proofing or editing.

While having occasional appeal, *Midway Magic* leaves me very frustrated and still looking for a good book about one of the Navy's most colorful post-World War II carriers.

PH3 William Hoick



***Midway* (CV 41) crew members gather on the flight deck as a SH-3D Sea King takes off during operations in the Arabian Sea on 16 December 1987. *Midway Magic* captures many personal stories from throughout *Midway's* history.**