

PROFESSIONAL READING

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



Alvarez, Jr., Everett and Pitch, Anthony S. *Chained Eagle*. Potomac Books, Inc., 22841 Quicksilver Dr., Dulles, VA 20166. 2005. 309 pp. Ill. \$19.95.

If you didn't read this book when it was first published (Donald I. Fine, 1989), I strongly recommend you do so with this new paperback edition. Besides beginning the Vietnam POW story from its start when the author, above, is shot down in August 1964, the narrative shows the reader how the North Vietnamese developed their "program."

It's important to make a historical distinction here. Before Alvarez, a few American servicemen had been captured on the ground while serving as advisors, and RF-8A pilot Lieutenant Charles F. Klusmann had been shot down over Laos in June 1964. But Alvarez was the unfortunate first of many American crewmen downed over North Vietnam.

At first, it seems that Alvarez's treatment, given the circumstances, is low key. The Vietnamese are surprised to have an American prisoner and appear unprepared to deal with his captivity. He is fed, clothed, asked several obligatory questions, then allowed to send and receive mail, and read books and magazines, albeit publications filled with communist propaganda. He even manages to develop somewhat friendly relationships with his guards.

His hope of an early release seems almost plausible.

However, everything changes by June 1966, nearly two years after his capture. The Vietnamese now realize that the Americans mean business. Daily bombing raids have devastated the country's industrial areas, delivering many more prisoners into an overburdened economy ill-equipped to support them. The Vietnamese are very angry, and the more familiar story of their unforgivably barbarous treatment of the prisoners begins to unfold.

Alvarez's story is one of alternating hope, despair, fortitude, and self-imagined shame as prisoners break under their harsh treatment, struggling to maintain their dignity but believing they have betrayed themselves, their country, and their fellow prisoners. We can only imagine their terrible ordeal.

At home, his family faces its own struggle of worrying and wondering if he is even alive. There are also internal problems, children against parents, wife against husband, with those determined to bring Alvarez home through petitions and demonstrations, or trying to find peace with another relationship.

Chained Eagle has relevance to today's servicemen and their families. The book moves back and forth giving Alvarez's history and revealing something of the anguish his family experienced during his almost nine-year captivity. In this regard, the editing is somewhat awkward. Occasionally, the reader is "dropped off" from Alvarez's first-person narrative, which is absolutely riveting, to pick up the story with a third-person treatment that makes one wonder as to whom is speaking. There are no set-ups or explanations, and this omission makes the reader have to stop and decide about who the narrator is. It is the coauthor, trying to establish scenes and circumstances outside Alvarez's cloistered existence in the Hanoi Hilton, but the transitions could have been better handled.

Be that as it may, *Chained Eagle* is one of the best books on Vietnam I have seen, and with the recent passing of that icon of the POW experience, Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale, it takes on greater importance. We should never forget how much these people gave up.

Mackay, Ron. *Britain's Fleet Air Arm, in World War II*. Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 4880 Lower Valley Road, Atglen, PA. 19310. 2005. Ill. \$59.95.

During World War II, Britain's Fleet Air Arm (FAA) seldom grabbed the headlines, being overshadowed by the Royal Air Force (RAF) and other countries' air forces in general. Yet, although burdened by an uncertain

parentage and organization, FAA units and their people had their fair share of the action throughout the war from Europe to the Pacific.

Ron Mackay's big book will go a long way in righting this wrong. For American readers unfamiliar with the Royal Navy overall and its seldom described record, there are many sections of interest. These chapters include the heroic actions in Norway in 1940; running battles with Nazi U-boats trying to torpedo the vital British carriers that were struggling to protect convoys and other ships while supporting ongoing operations ashore; as well as combat with Italy's small but occasionally energetic navy.

Less famous types of aircraft like the Fairey Fulmar and Blackburn Skua held the line during the first two years of action, yet today remain unknown except by enthusiasts. Only their stablemate, the Fairey

While the collection of photos is great, showing many rare and often close-up views of evocative aircraft and their crews, perhaps half of them are of crash scenes. The reason for this division may be that the best photos available were of the mishaps that occurred all too frequently on a carrier's flight deck.

There are a few editorial slips and sloppy language, which are hallmarks of this particular publisher, though nothing new in today's arena of military publishing, sad to say. The text has the annoying convention of using too many capital letters, especially in the case of ship's names, for which italics are more correct.

I take greatest issue with the last section, which is a folio of color renderings showing various FAA aircraft. The artist's amateurish style is particularly highlighted by odd proportions in the tail and fuselage, indicating he merely traced his subjects from photographs, which often distort a plane's outline because of lens parallax and the photographer's position. Also, although titled as such, the renderings are seldom profiles as the aircraft are usually presented in a three-quarter view. Thus, fuselages are elongated, tails squashed and reduced, and the drawings come off looking more like wallpaper designs for a child's bedroom than the serious depiction of important warplanes described in the text. It's a shame, and the author and his book, and the reader, deserve much better.

That said, the book is worth its high price, and certainly offers greater detail than I have seen on this important but overlooked subject.

Swordfish, above, attained its measure of fame. Thus, this book's description of early war action is welcome. There are several fine views of Blackburn Rocs, a variant of the Skua that featured a four-gun turret mounted directly aft of the pilot. Not much has been written about the Roc's brief operational career, and Mackay's book offers considerably more than has been available.

There are several areas of concern with what could have been an excellent treatment of this unique subject.

