

2005

All the Factors of Victory: Admiral Joseph Mason Reeves and the Origins of Carrier Airpower,

Chris Madsen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Madsen, Chris (2005) "All the Factors of Victory: Admiral Joseph Mason Reeves and the Origins of Carrier Airpower," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 58 : No. 1 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol58/iss1/21>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.



Wildenberg, Thomas. *All the Factors of Victory: Admiral Joseph Mason Reeves and the Origins of Carrier Airpower*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2003. 326pp. \$27.50

Admiral Joseph Reeves was an important influence on the development of American naval aviation during the interwar period, but like many other senior officers who served in peacetime, he has not received the attention he deserves. Thomas Wildenberg, building upon his previous work on dive bombing in the U.S. Navy prior to the Battle of Midway, strives to honor Admiral Reeves with a scholarly biography focused on his professional life and contributions.

Wildenberg argues that Reeves's background, attention to improved training and doctrine, and ability to push innovation within the existing organizational structure were key factors behind the nascent idea of carrier strike forces, which subsequently came to maturation during the U.S. Navy's Pacific operations in World War II. Like another well known admiral, William Moffet, Reeves was a true pioneer in naval aviation. He was among the first to recognize its potential and work out the practical application of this new form of warfare within the fleet.

Reeves followed a unique career progression. Wildenberg traces Reeves's scholastic and athletic achievements as a young engineering naval cadet at Annapolis; his combat experience during the Spanish-American War; conversion to an ordnance specialization; various sea and shore appointments before reaching command of the battleship USS *North Dakota*; time as a student and tactical instructor at the

Naval War College; and his entry into the naval aviation world at the age of fifty-two. As Commander Aircraft Squadrons, Battle Fleet onboard the experimental carrier USS *Langley*, Reeves challenged his flyers to solve a "thousand and one questions" to which even he did not have the answers. He concentrated the squadrons for intensive training and practice with new types of aircraft then being delivered. After a short stint with the U.S. delegation to the 1927 Geneva Conference, Reeves was promoted to rear admiral and returned to lead naval aviation from an experimental status to full-fledged integration into the fleet.

Wildenberg's description of Reeves, with entourage in tow, personally directing the movement of planes around *Langley's* flight deck when a subordinate officer named John Towers dared to report that no more could be crowded onboard, is priceless. The new purpose-built aircraft carriers USS *Lexington* and *Saratoga* provided the means for Reeves to test novel concepts of deployments in peacetime fleet exercises on a larger scale—the turning point being Fleet Problem IX in January 1929, when Reeves launched the mock aerial strikes against the Panama Canal described so well by Wildenberg at the book's opening. Thereafter, Reeves quickly rose in responsibility before his retirement as commander in chief of the U.S. Fleet with the rank of admiral in 1936—the first naval aviator to hold the appointment.

During World War II Reeves returned to the Department of the Navy to coordinate Lend-Lease activities on behalf of Secretary Frank Knox, as well as to act as U.S. naval representative on the Combined Munitions Assignment

Board alongside Harry Hopkins. Having given so much to his country, Reeves died on 25 March 1948.

Although a powerful speaker and orator, Reeves published very little and left behind no personal papers. In writing this biography, Wildenberg has done an admirable job of detective work, collecting together information from a diverse range of official and private sources. He uses a 1943 Princeton University undergraduate thesis based on interviews with Reeves, but little remains known of the admiral's family and personal life, other than the impression that he was a lonely man devoted full-heartedly to the navy. A ruthless streak in Reeves's character, however, comes out in his treatment of hapless Lieutenant Commander Robert Molten—an episode to be repeated during a run-in with a Royal Navy ordnance officer, Stephen Roskill, in Washington, D.C., during the summer of 1944. Wildenberg's conclusions about Reeves's attitude toward the British might have been tempered by closer study of his wartime work on the Combined Munitions Assignment Board. No reference is made in the book to Reeves's working files from the Lend-Lease Office of Record in Record Group 38 at the National Archive and Records Administration, or the diaries of Vice Admiral James Dorling, his British naval counterpart on the Combined Munitions Assignment Board at Greenwich's National Maritime Museum. In Reeves's second service tour, he facilitated American production behind the global war effort at sea and actually excelled in office work and the numbers game.

Even though biographies are somewhat out of fashion today and Wildenberg shows a tendency to give a little too

much weight to the man than to larger international trends in naval aviation at the time, Reeves clearly pressed, with single-minded determination, the existing technological and doctrinal limits of U.S. naval aviation and prepared his forces accordingly.

The book, which offers interesting insights into experimentation and innovation for future warfare in peacetime navies, is highly recommended for specialist historians and interested general readers.

CHRIS MADSEN
Canadian Forces College
Toronto, Ontario



De Kay, James Tertius. *A Rage for Glory: The Life and Times of Commodore Stephen Decatur, USN*. New York: Free Press, 2004. 237pp. \$25

Accomplished historian and author James de Kay captures the essence of an age, as well as the spirit of a man, in his biography of Commodore Stephen Decatur. This finely written narrative, aimed at a general readership, may lack the scholarly apparatus expected of historical monographs, but it certainly does not lack the scholarship and analysis that is the hallmark of de Kay's work. Yet if this book sometimes appears to be a cross between an action-thriller and a hagiography, there is a reason. Decatur's active quest for fame and glory, as well as the deep sense of honor that would clip short his thread of life at age forty-one, earned the commodore a place in the hearts of his countrymen perhaps more appropriate for a saint. His name still echoes in those of some forty-five towns, five warships, and numerous other pieces of Americana.