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The Golden Age Remembered: U.S. Naval Aviation, 1919-1941

Peter Mersky

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critical questions by key individuals throughout the development of both the carrier and its aircraft. Within a month of reporting aboard USS *Langley* (CV 1), then Captain J. M. Reeves, one of the fathers of naval aviation, told his officers that they had "no conception of either the capabilities or the limitations of the air force." He subsequently generated a set of "A Thousand and One Questions" and issues that had to be answered before aircraft could be considered an effective weapon for use by the fleet.

Later, when *Lexington* and *Saratoga* entered the fleet, Reeves and others ceaselessly asked how carriers and their aircraft might be best employed in attacking different targets, how they would operate in support of the fleet, how they could be defended from enemy ships and aircraft, and so on.

The book is especially valuable for its emphasis on the intellectual processes and empirical experimentation that culminated in the "glory" of its title. It is often forgotten, after the fact, that so many of the decisions and choices that led to great successes were by no means obvious at the time and that many errors and "dry holes," easily ignored today, littered the ultimately successful path taken. This may be a particularly useful reminder to those who now easily attach the term "revolutionary" to the favored project *du jour* without having done the hard work of proving just how and why the claim is justified.

Thomas Wildenberg is a naval historian whose special interest is the U.S. Navy during the interwar period. He is currently a Fellow for Naval Aviation at the National Air and Space museum. Wildenberg has also authored *Gray Steel*

and *Black Oil: Fast Tankers and Replenishment at Sea in the U.S. Navy, 1912-1992*. He is now working on a biography of Admiral J. M. Reeves, one that we hope will heighten the profile of this underappreciated pioneer of carrier aviation.

JAN VAN TOI
Commander, U.S. Navy

Wooldridge, E. T., ed. *The Golden Age Remembered: U.S. Naval Aviation, 1919-1941*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998. 376pp. \$34.95

Third in a series that uses the Naval Institute's copious oral-history collection, this book features first-person accounts of one of the least-described periods of naval aviation. Little of any length or depth has been written about naval air's interwar developments, especially from such a deeply personal aspect, and so this new effort, from an experienced author, historian, and naval aviator, is welcome. It is also arguably the best of the three published works in the series.

The Golden Age Remembered is a tale of pioneers shepherding their nascent charge through its infancy, fighting off those who wished it stillborn, and through an adolescence rife with tortuous developments. Important names and actions abound in these pages. The narrative gives ample glimpses of early giants whose deeds, if perhaps not personalities, are unknown. There are men like Mel Pride, who gives a fascinating account of developing carrier-landing systems. Figures come more to life here than in a mere historical chronology.

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The personal accounts describe the conversion of the collier *Jupiter* to the Navy's first aircraft carrier, renamed *Langley*, and its early vital use as a trainer for carrier aviators. An interesting aside relates how early air operations were frequently filmed, so that aviators could study launching and recovery techniques. As a natural result, a lot of mishaps, crashes, and near misses were caught on film. Where did all that film go? Given the terrible storage practices as well as the deterioration that old motion picture film suffered, it's likely it has disappeared long ago. Pity.

The danger of flying wood-and-canvas aircraft is clearly shown and can be juxtaposed against the current hazards. Maybe the planes of today are more durable, but when they fail or their operators do not fly them properly, the results are the same as sixty years ago.

This book highlights a basic difference between today's way of doing business and how things were done then. One recent review notes this difference also, but with more sadness at perceived freedoms lost than I am ready to allow. It is an interesting quandary: operations between 1919 and 1941 seem to have accepted losses in lives and machines for the sake of greater freedom and more colorful personalities. Do we now enjoy our far greater margin of safety and mission readiness at the expense of our professional souls and individual expression? We can wax philosophical on this question forever and probably never resolve a thing. However, reading this book certainly tells me we have lost our innocence over the years, that we have exchanged it for a more worldly, even tougher,

outlook on what it takes to fly military machines, especially from such tenuous places as aircraft carriers.

This book also features forty-six photographs. I place great store in a book's selection of photos, and I sometimes lament poor layout or presentation, to say nothing of poor reproduction, especially at today's highly inflated retail prices. Current publishers often print photos on the same stock as the text, which is usually uncoated paper—fine for black type but not for the often graying black-and-white images. The Naval Institute Press occasionally falls in this category, and it does in this case. *The Golden Age Remembered* has some excellent photos, but I wish the publisher had spent a little more money and used traditional folio of coated stock. There are several really good views of men and aircraft—a few I have never seen before, such as photo numbers 40, 41, and 42—that show close-ups of SBUs, PM-1s, and P2Ds on the flight deck, at anchor, or in flight. Though not nearly as well known as some types of the day, these evocative aircraft were part of a truly colorful era.

Tim Wooldridge is doing a great service in his project by giving the U.S. Naval Institute's oral histories a public airing. They represent primary sources far too important simply to keep on file.

PETER MERSKY
Norfolk, Virginia

Koistinen, Paul A. *Mobilizing for War: The Political Economy of American Warfare, 1865–1919*. Lawrence: