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Crommelin's Thunderbirds: Air Group 12 Strikes the Heart of Japan

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Okinawa 1945 is uneven. Sometimes it is enjoyable and entertaining, yet a turn of the page can present a seemingly endless stretch of colorless prose of the kind one expects in a Navy "oporder." This reviewer was prepared to attribute the annoying and persistent typographical errors (e.g., "Admiral Kummel" instead of "Kimmel") to poor editing until the next to the last page of the book. There I was surprised to discover that "on 6 September the Americans dropped the first A-bomb on Hiroshima; on 7 September the Soviet Union declared war on Japan; and on 9 September the second A-bomb was dropped on Nagasaki." The actual dates for these events were 6, 8, and 9 August respectively, and this final bit of sloppiness caused me to question the blizzard of statistics Foster offers. It was time to cross-check *Okinawa 1945* against Samuel Eliot Morison's *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II: Victory in the Pacific 1945*. I am a great admirer of Morison's history of the war, and apparently so is Simon Foster. The author's account of the *Kikusui* attacks reads remarkably like Morison's—occasionally word for word. Although Foster does cite several long passages from Morison, he needs to be more forthcoming as to his reliance upon Morison's scholarship.

I was unable to locate any information about Simon Foster, the author, in either *Contemporary Authors* or the *Book Review Digest*. Also, the editors of this journal and I were unsuccessful in obtaining a biography of him from the book's publisher.

Save yourself the hefty price tag of this book and go to the library or your

favorite used book store and get a copy of Morison's work. It is a more readable and engaging account of the naval action around Okinawa. For an excellent depiction of the battle ashore, try James and William Belote's *Typhoon of Steel: The Battle for Okinawa*, or William Manchester's *Goodbye Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War*—a compelling, personal description of the fierce fighting on Okinawa from a Marine infantryman's point of view.

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Bruce, R.W. and Leonard, C. R.
Crommelin's Thunderbirds: Air Group 12 Strikes the Heart of Japan. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1994. 228pp. \$26.95

This work is a narrative history of the activation, training, and combat deployment of CAG (Carrier Air Group) 12 in USS *Randolph* (CV 15) during the waning months of World War II. The group adopted its nickname from its first "skipper," Commander Charles Crommelin; the three (later four) assigned squadrons all adopted emblems employing a stylized southwestern Indian thunderbird. Bruce and Leonard were assigned to Fighting Squadron 12 and Fighting-Bombing Squadron 12 respectively.

They wrote this book as a result of their 1987 air group reunion in Charleston, South Carolina, onboard the USS *Yorktown*, in order to preserve the memories of air wing personnel for future generations. It is a

compilation of interviews and written histories, and it includes many photographs provided by the air group photographer. This approach is both the strength and weakness of the book. On one hand, it is a very personal recollection of the triumphs, tragedies, and moments of humor and sheer terror shared by the men of CAG 12. On the other, portions of the narrative are disjointed, particularly in the early chapters, where the authors switch back and forth between air group training, stage-setting events in the Pacific theater, and historical background material. There is also a minor problem with technical errors, such as repeated references to the "Army Air Corps"—the Army's air arm was formally renamed the Army Air Forces on 20 June 1941.

Minor confusion and technical glitches aside, *Thunderbirds* is an excellent work. This is the carrier war in the Pacific as fought by the men at the tip of the spear. The sources of its personal material range from the leaders to the air crews and from support personnel to the flight deck crews, both officer and enlisted. The authors cover adequately all aspects of air group operations in the offense and defense, including fighter, fighter-bomber, torpedo, and scout bomber activities. They have also included excellent coverage of the ship's company of the *Randolph* and its role in the carrier war.

Bruce and Leonard describe the melding of individuals, aircraft, and warship into a cohesive fighting unit. A recurring theme is the importance of leadership, commitment, teamwork, training, and, above all else, communication up and down the chain of

command. From their initial workups, the CAG 12 and CV 15 team moved across the Pacific in support of theater operations in the fight against a determined enemy who had resorted to kamikaze attacks. The group's last operations were over Japan. CAG 12 returned to the United States and was dissolved in July 1945—one month short of final victory.

Bruce and Leonard have succeeded in their effort to preserve the memory of air wing crews. *Thunderbirds* is good reading and a good source on the personnel who carried out national security policy in 1945.

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Kernan, Alvin. *Crossing the Line: A Bluejacket's World War II Odyssey*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1994. 192pp. \$21.95

McBride, William M., ed. *Goodnight Officially: The Pacific War Letters of a Destroyer Sailor*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994. 307pp. \$24.95

It is striking how different apparently similar books can be. The two under review are both accounts not of the Second World War itself but of the experience of that war by an enlisted—but essentially civilian—narrator. Both authors served at sea in the Pacific theater and are remarkably articulate. The differences, however, become immediately apparent: Alvin Kernan was an "airedale," an ordnanceman turned torpedo-bomber aircrewman, while Orville Raines, whose letters are reproduced in *Goodnight Officially*, was