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Going Downtown: The War against Hanoi and Washington

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Broughton, Jack. *Going Downtown: The War against Hanoi and Washington*. New York: Pocket Books, 1988. 283pp. \$4.95

It is never too late to learn the truth about an important chapter in history. In this welcome paperback reissue of a book he published some years ago, Jack Broughton, Colonel, U.S. Air Force (Ret.) does a magnificent job of recalling his experiences in the air war over North Vietnam from 1964 to 1967—the toughest years of air combat (at least in that war) with the possible exception of 1972. He also does an excellent job of establishing the relationship between the decisions made in Washington and their effects on the conduct of the war.

Broughton establishes his credentials as a combat fighter pilot by beginning with a chapter on his experiences in air combat during the Korean War. The author began his operational flying in P-47s in Germany in the late 1940s; from that point to his final flights over Vietnam, it seems as if he flew most of the fighter aircraft in the U.S. Air Force. He also does an authoritative job in briefly describing the operational strengths and weaknesses of most of the U.S. Air Force fighters of that era. In one piece of modesty, Colonel Broughton seems to downplay the fact that, in this period, he also had a tour of duty as the leader of the very select group of fighter pilots flying with the Air Force acrobatic demonstration team, the Thunderbirds. As an aviator and as a man, Jack Broughton finished his

military flying career at the top of the ladder—a wing commander flying daily combat sorties in F-105s—“Thuds”—from Thailand to “Downtown” Hanoi. So he is well-qualified to write an “inside” account of the most severe combat and the abundant guns, missiles, and fighters in opposition.

Colonel Broughton also writes an excellent account of the best and the worst leadership involved in the air war, and in the wider politico-military war. Beyond his favorite targets in North Vietnam, he takes aim with a vengeance on the usual political targets—Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert S. McNamara. He also does a job on a number of Air Force generals who, in his professional judgment, tried to direct the war from afar while possessing neither the experience nor the integrity to do so competently. At the same time, Broughton gives full credit to those leaders of professional competence, relevant experience, and the best of motives.

The book is by no means overloaded with politics and discontent. It is primarily a personal story about air combat, bravery, and the victories and defeats of the author and those around him. It is a full account of how-to and how-not-to organize, lead and fight in the air.

The recollections of combat from two wars are as real and authentic as any can be. There may be some exaggeration, but not much. (Navy pilots flying the same kinds of missions at the same time to the same places could verify Broughton’s

description. For an example of the parallels, read *One Day in a Long War* by Jeffrey Ethell and Alfred Price (New York: Random House, 1989) to compare the similar narratives of Navy and Air Force crews originating from different places, but fighting the same enemy.) This book ought to be read for its description of war, and its honest appraisal of vulnerable human beings under the stress of combat—or the stress of organizational pressures and personal ambitions.

If the book has a weakness, it could be the overuse of the word “I”. But that should not keep you from reading it. The man had to have been extraordinary in order to have done the things he did.

In fact, *Going Downtown* ought to be required reading for all Air Force Academy cadets and other military flight students, including prospective Naval Aviators. It’s not too late for designated aviators to learn either.

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Brown, David. *The Seafire: The Spitfire that Went to Sea*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1989. 208pp. \$24.95

Lamb, Charles, ed. *War in a Stringbag*. London: Leo Cooper, 1987. 325pp. \$28

Winton, John. *Carrier Glorious: The Life and Death of an Aircraft Carrier*. Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1986. 254pp. \$32

For the naval officer and historian well-versed in the role of U.S. naval aviation during World War II, these three books offer a fascinating insight into the different experience of Britain’s Fleet Air Arm carriers. The first book is about a carrier fighter plane, the Seafire; the second book is an autobiographical account by Charles Lamb, one of the pilots of a torpedo-bombing squadron, 815 Swordfish; the third book is about a single carrier, the *Glorious*, that was sunk early in the war, 8 June 1940. Together, these works provide an American reader with a survey of the evolution of carrier aviation from a completely different perspective—different in roles and missions, different in flight deck procedures and different in wardroom humor.

Of the three, *War in a Stringbag* makes the best read. The “Stringbag” was Britain’s slow, awkward, and virtually obsolete Fairey Swordfish. Lamb’s tale is not only of raw courage but of real ingenuity as he and his mates overcame the severe handicaps of the Swordfish, a 100-knot airplane trying to fight and survive in a sky filled with 300-knot enemies.

What was it like to survive the sinking of one’s carrier? Lamb begins his memoir with a terrific account of his experience—the destruction of the *Courageous* (twin to the *Glorious*) by a U-boat in British waters on 17 September 1939. The most harrowing aspect was to convince many crewmen, especially the mustered Royal Marines, to jump overboard. The latter only jumped after a flyer