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The Seafire: The Spitfire that went to Sea

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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

gave a loud command: "ROYAL MARINES—HUN! TURN FOR'ARD—DISMISS! ABANDON SHIP—OVER THE SIDE AT THE DOUBLE—EVERY MAN JACK OF YOU!"

Later Lamb was assigned to the big *Illustrious*, a full-fledged new fleet carrier, for operations in the Mediterranean. That ship's most important operation was the night attack on the Italian fleet at Taranto in November 1940. Lamb sheds light on the five-year-old plan for the attack and describes the role of the pathfinders, of whom he was one, in leading 815 and 819 Squadrons as they crippled the Italian fleet. Interestingly, interservice differences forced the Navy to steal the necessary intelligence photos from the R.A.F. for the pre-battle briefing!

Two months later, in January 1941, the *Illustrious* was badly damaged by Stuka dive bombers off Malta and had to withdraw, leaving her homeless pilots to operate from bases successively in Malta, Crete, Greece, and Egypt.

In addition to many carrier pilots who flew with distinction in these early actions, two key leaders emerge—Rear Admiral Lumley Lyster and Captain Denis W. Boyd, whose talents kept them at the forefront of British carrier aviation throughout the war.

Lamb's recall of verbatim conversations is wonderful, if slightly suspect. He relied on second-hand accounts to fill in gaps of the story. Yet fact is often more remarkable than fiction; for example, landing

Swordfish planes in occupied Tunisia to spirit spies in and out of enemy territory under the very nose of the mistrusted Vichy French. On one such caper, in September 1941, Lamb landed in a muddy lake and was captured.

When Vichy France changed sides late in 1942, Lamb returned home for a year and then found himself among many former *Illustrious* shipmates on the new *Implacable* as "Lieutenant-Commander Flying" in charge of hangar and flight deck operations in the Pacific.

John Winton's *Carrier Glorious* is unusual in its intimate portrayal of prewar British carriers. Relying heavily on interviews and personal letters, Winton paints the best and most complete picture of any carrier of any navy of the 1930s. Converted from a cruiser hull, like the *Furious* and *Courageous* during World War I, the *Glorious* did her greatest service in the Mediterranean, providing air cover with three dozen planes for the British fleet, who were trying to deter Italian ambitions in that region.

Fleet exercises stressed convoy protection and multi-carrier operations with the *Eagle*. Shipboard routine is an eye-opener, including daily issues of rum and tobacco as well as anti-gas drills and night-flying operations. Malta's protection occupied the fleet, especially during the Abyssinian crisis and the Spanish Civil War; and *Glorious* was in the thick of it all.

As in the prewar U.S. Navy, men who would dominate wartime oper-

ations appeared on the ungainly carrier in one role or another—Lyster, Bruce Fraser, Edward Evans-Lombe, and L. D. Mackintosh. However, none come more alive than Captain Guy D'Orly-Hughes, a flamboyant submariner who became skipper of the *Glorious* in June 1939. He brought the ship into World War II. A hardheaded, overzealous veteran, he so shunned the advice of his more expert airmen that he lost his ship the following June off Norway to two German battleships.

Winton treats the controversy over the ship's loss by thoroughly analyzing the break between D'Orly-Hughes and his "Commander (Flying)"—air officer—Commander J. B. Heath, a gentle man and early career aviator who bore the brunt of the captain's displeasure. Appraising the merits of the case fairly was difficult, for D'Orly-Hughes sacked Heath, ruining his career, and sent him home just days before the fatal battle, in which the captain was killed. Winton, drawing upon the final analysis of the official British naval historian Captain Stephen Roskill, concludes that D'Orly-Hughes' capricious behavior was a major cause of the *Glorious'* loss.

No fewer than 1,207 men were lost from the ship, leaving only 38 survivors.

David Brown's tome might have been titled "All You Wanted to Know about the Seafire but Were Afraid to Ask." Virtually every flight from every carrier in every action by the naval version of the

Supermarine Spitfire is recalled in minute detail, or at least listed. The book is a complete reference work. It includes deck crashes and is replete with appendices on technical details, chronologies, air actions, and squadron or base assignments of each Seafire ever built.

After explaining the several modified versions of the Seafire, the author chronicles its combat record that begins with the invasion of North Africa in November 1942, off the *Furious*, *Formidable*, *Argus*, and *Victorious*. The planes served on escort carrier in the Italian and southern France campaigns and suffered high operational losses. Never the equal of the U.S.-built F4U Corsair and F6F Hellcat, the Seafire was often relegated to combat air patrols or gunfire spotting. But it complemented the American-built planes on carriers of the British Eastern and Pacific fleets against Japan during 1945. The Seafires did see some action in Malaya, Korea, French Indochina, and Burma between 1948 and 1954, fighting communist guerrillas and armies. Statistics of sorties summarize each action.

As an encyclopedic book, *The Seafire* is unsurpassed among carrier plane histories. Even the large number of superb photographs is unequalled for a book of this type. But it is downright dull reading.

Together these volumes serve to remind Americans that the British not only invented the aircraft carrier, but that their carriers fought a war all alone until the United

States rallied to their side. All three books include a wealth of heretofore unpublished photos, making their narratives even more graphic. Lessons for modern-day shapers of national security abound in all three.

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Poolman, Kenneth. *Allied Escort Carriers of World War Two*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988. 272pp. \$29.95

Allied Escort Carriers of World War II builds on Kenneth Poolman's earlier work, *Escort Carrier, 1941-45*, which deals only with the British escort carrier experience. His new book includes U.S. hunter-killer operations in the Atlantic, as well as escort carrier operations by both navies in the Indian and Pacific oceans. Both books provide a detailed account of day-to-day CVE operations, particularly in the Atlantic.

The present volume has two advantages, aside from additional basic research. It is written in the full knowledge of the very effective first homing torpedo (the U.S. developed Mk 24 "mine"), and the revelation (not emphasized sufficiently) of the use of ULTRA intelligence to determine upcoming German submarine operations. The latter in particular—not publicly known until the late seventies—made the U.S. CVE hunter-killer group concept possible.

The escort carrier was created because of the British need to counter long range air attacks on merchant shipping in the mid-Atlantic where British land-based fighters could not reach. The first CVE was the *Audacity*, a captured German merchant ship upon which a flight deck, but no island or hangar, was built. She operated American made F4F Grumman fighters. Hers was a brief career, beginning in September 1941 and ending on 21 December, when she was sunk by the *U-751*. The U.S. by then was largely involved with the conversion of Maritime Commission C-3 hulls to CVEs. These went first to the British and then, after Pearl Harbor, to the U.S. Navy. Ultimately, the British operated 44 CVEs of which they built six, while the U.S. managed 80 CVEs of four classes, all merchant hull based designs. The U.S. lost one CVE in the Atlantic, and five in the Pacific. The British lost three, all in the Atlantic.

In the Atlantic antisubmarine war, the U.S. Navy got the better deal since it was assigned to close the lower half of the mid-Atlantic gap where the German submarines were safe from shore-based Allied ASW aircraft. There U.S. forces, not concerned with possible surface or air actions, perfected the independently operated CVE hunter-killer group which relied heavily on HFDF bearings and ULTRA intelligence to find enemy submarines.

In contrast, the British CVEs operated near the convoys, shielding them against both air and U-boat