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## The Naval Air War in Vietnam

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## 80 Naval War College Review

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Mersky, Peter B. and Polmar, Norman.  
*The Naval Air War in Vietnam*.  
Annapolis, Md.: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1981. 224pp. \$17.95

The Vietnam war has often been described as an undertaking "long on sorrow and short on glory." In retrospect, it seems that what glory there was in this difficult conflict often came from the exploits of the brave young aviators who carried the battle to the enemy's doorstep. *The Naval Air War in Vietnam*, by Peter Mersky and Norman Polmar, graphically tells the story of the many Navy and Marine Corps pilots who rode into battle wielding the most sophisticated weapons in the history of warfare. It is noteworthy that the authors did not fall victim to the disease sometimes known as "fighter-itis"; they also chronicle brilliantly the contributions of reconnaissance and patrol aircraft that performed equally vital if less glamorous tasks during America's longest war. Polmar, winner of the Navy League of the United States Alfred Thayer Mahan Award for Literary Achievement, is best known for his highly respected editing of the U.S. section of *Jane's Fighting Ships*.

He is joined by Peter B. Mersky, a former naval aviator and air intelligence officer, in a venture that gives the first full account of naval air warfare during the Vietnam era.

The book is introduced by V. Adm W.L. McDonald, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air Warfare), who describes it as

the most complete chronicle of the air war in Viet Nam yet to be published. This book offers a vivid description of what that war was to the warrior in the sky and how he performed.

Drawing from the personal experiences of the pilots themselves (over 50 of whom are mentioned by name), the authors tell of the heartbreaking frustration generated by the incredibly strict constraints placed on their actions by political leaders seeking to limit the war to a set of unrealistic parameters. These restrictions were reminiscent of similar sanctions placed on pilots during the Korean war which allowed them to bomb only the *south* end of Yalu River bridges. The authors cite many examples of the impact of such restrictions:

The port of Cam Pha, an important North Vietnamese coal depot, could not be attacked when there were any foreign ships in the harbor. Naturally the North took advantage of this ruling and it was a rare day when a foreign ship was not tied up to a pier at Cam Pha. The frustration of the men who risked their lives daily entering the intense corridors of flak and

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**SAMS** can be imagined, as they fought not only the enemy on the ground, but also the so-called rules of engagement laid down by their government. Even when ships in harbors opened up with 37-mm fire, the Navy pilots were strictly admonished not to fire back.

*The Naval Air War in Vietnam* depicts accurately a wide spectrum of air operations ranging from massive raids against the North to lonely patrol flights along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The authors detail the use of dozens of aircraft types from the last of the Navy's piston-engine attack planes, the A-1H *Skyraider*, to the F-14A *Tomcats*, which provided fighter cover during Operation Frequent Wind, the final evacuation of Saigon. They even provide a glimpse of such exotic craft as the Patrol Air Cushion Vehicles (PACV) that were described as "one-third airplane, one-third helicopter, and one-third boat" and the SP-5B *Marlin*, the last flying boats used operationally by the U.S. Navy.

This outstanding book is filled with more than 200 photographs and charts, and while it is a "must" for every aviator's bookshelf, it will be enjoyed equally by readers with their feet on the ground but their hearts in the clouds.

JOHN E. JACKSON  
Lieutenant Commander, U.S. Navy

Rausa, Rosario. *Gold Wings, Blue Sea: A Naval Aviator's Story*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1980. 200pp. \$15.95

Flying of any kind seems to hold a general attraction for people but naval aviation has its own special mystique centered on the aircraft carrier and its around-the-clock flight operations. Carrier ops successfully made the transition from prop-driven to jet aircraft a couple of decades ago, an era of transition which this book bridges.

The author, a reserve naval captain, completed naval flight training in the late 1950s and served several tours on board the *Forrestal* as an AD (later A-1 *Skyraider*) pilot. Nearly two-thirds of the book deals with his exploits as a student pilot and vignettes of life as an operational aircrew on duty in the Mediterranean. The last third of the book relates Rausa's experiences during a combat tour with the A-1 aboard the *Coral Sea* during the Southeast Asia conflict.

This book does not break any new ground in the trials and tribulations of learning to fly or life as a military pilot. Many of the stories about a particular flight or shipboard personality are loosely tied together with no connection to each other. For those who served with Captain Rausa, these scenes will probably prove both enjoyable and memorable.

The author's role as the pilot of a reciprocating airplane on board a predominantly jet-equipped carrier provides a different insight into a world that is virtually gone. The details of interminable nine-hour low-level strike missions leave the reader thankful for present-day cruise speeds. There is a certain glamour, however, to an aircraft whose speed allows the pilot time to think.

*Gold Wings, Blue Sea* is well-written but the interesting sections are too thinly scattered to be enjoyable. It is not a comprehensive look at carrier aviation but it is the story of the years which made up so much of one naval aviator's life.

DON RIGHTMYER  
Captain, U.S. Air Force

Sherrard, D.G. *To Antarctica With the Royal Navy*, New York: Vantage Press, 1981. 122pp. \$7.95

David Sherrard and I served together in the mid-60s. He was at times extremely amusing, and at times, exasperating. I feel he was born too late; he might have done well in submarines in