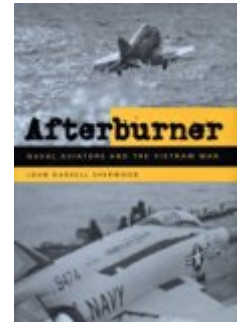


John Darrell Sherwood. *Afterburner: Naval Aviators and the Vietnam War.* New York and London: New York University Press, 2004. x + 353 pp. \$32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-9842-3.



Reviewed by William Trimble

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History is replete with ironies, contradictions, paradoxes, and mysteries, and the Vietnam War is no exception. With *Afterburner* John Sherwood has presented us with another book on Vietnam, adding to the already vast literature on America's longest war. Central to the book is a fundamental irony: naval aviation, Sherwood asserts, was a success in the midst of what otherwise was a colossal diplomatic and military failure--certainly the worst in twentieth-century American history. Sherwood takes on this intellectual challenge by borrowing from some of the "new military history," focusing on those who fought the war and on the undercurrents of the conflict through the eyes of those who fought it, not from the point of view of the decision makers in the Pentagon or White House.

Sherwood relies heavily on first-person accounts, interviewing thirty-four principals over more than three years. We understand from this perspective about what it was like to fly from a World War II-vintage carrier that could barely make the speed to provide enough wind over the flight deck for safe takeoffs and landings and that

never had enough fresh water to provide simultaneously for its steam and the crew's personal requirements. We learn about the teamwork and tactics, both inside the cockpit and out, that were needed to make a MiG "kill," considered the Holy Grail of all fighter pilots in Vietnam and attainable by only a minuscule few--0.0005 percent according to Sherwood's reckoning. Enduring captivity in the Hoa Lo Prison (the "Hanoi Hilton") brought out the best and worst in POWs. A Non-Flying Officer (NFO) who came up through the ranks displayed more initiative and leadership in saving the lives of injured air force POWs than did their own superior officers. A marine squadron commander, always regarded as a "weak pilot," took leave at a critical time to attend his daughter's high school graduation, against the advice of his comrades. His forty-two-year career in the service came to an end when he was relieved and replaced with another officer more skilled and willing to commit his unit to the sacrifices needed to become accomplished carrier aviators. There are many more tales like these; all are compelling and vividly told, leaving the reader with a feel for the

courage, determination, and sacrifice these men made in an unpopular war.

In many ways, the book is a paean to the navy's NFOs, who flew either alongside or behind pilots in A-6 Intruders and F-4 Phantoms, and who constituted 20 percent of the flying officers in the service. These men were not highly regarded by arrogant and self-reliant fighter pilots, who only grudgingly acceded to the necessity of having assistance in the cockpit in the complex electronic age. For their part, the NFOs tended to see pilots as "voice-actuated autopilots" who served no real purpose other than to get the weapon system into the vicinity of the target. The unique culture of the naval aviator is also apparent in Sherwood's probing of the reasons why these men fought, knowing, as they did from 1968 through the end of American involvement in the war in 1973, that it was a lost cause. The answer gets to the soul of the professional warrior, who fought because he was a highly trained and motivated professional. More specifically, he understood combat to be the crucible that tested his abilities and was equally determined to fight to secure a settlement that guaranteed the release of his buddies incarcerated in Hanoi.

If one is looking for a complete picture of the naval air war in Vietnam, this is not the book. It covers only the years after 1968. And there is nothing on those aviators who did not fly from carriers and yet still made material contributions to the war: not on the patrol squadrons that spent many thousands of hours in the air securing the South Vietnamese coast, nor of the helicopter units that supported the "brown water navy" in hazardous riverine operations, nor the light attack squadrons flying twin-engine OV-10s that provided close air support in the Mekong Delta.

There are also minor errors in the book that detract from its overall impression. Young men in the early 1960s were not coerced into Naval Officer Candidate School by low draft numbers because there were no numbers until the first draft

lottery in 1969. Their decisions to volunteer came as a result of local Selective Service System boards' individual policies regarding fulfillment of monthly quotas from the available pool of eligible men. The Douglas F3D was the Skyknight, and not the "Skynight," although it is easy to confuse the latter name considering its mission was all-weather and night attack. The *Essex*-class carriers, when converted and modernized in the 1950s, received C-11 steam catapults with 211-foot--not 150-foot--strokes. Lt. Col. Joseph Kittinger jumped out of a high-altitude gas-filled, not hot-air, balloon at 96,000 feet. Surprising and disappointing is the lack of maps in a book that at the very least needs a general map showing the two Vietnams and the principal operating areas off the coast.

But the reader should not be distracted from the salient point that this book provides more evidence for the limits of air power. Sherwood is correct that air power in Vietnam was not decisive. Nor could it be. Vietnam was not a war that could be won from the air, either by naval aviators or their air force counterparts, no matter how well they were trained or how bravely they fought. The mining of Haiphong harbor and the intense bombing of North Vietnam in Linebackers I and II succeeded only in bringing the leaders of the two Vietnams to the negotiating table and in allowing the United States to extricate itself from the war with a modicum of honor. As this war fades in our memories, it simultaneously takes on more tragic dimensions, most characterized by the futility of the effort at the squadron and individual level. One could argue with Sherwood about the success of naval air power in Vietnam, but no one can argue with him about the terrible irony revealed by those who fought honorably in what was in the final analysis a dishonorable war.

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