

# H-Net Reviews

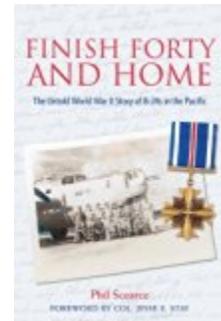
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Phil Searce. *Finish Forty and Home: The Untold World War II Story of B-24s in the Pacific*. May-born Literary Nonfiction Series. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2011. Illustrations. 352 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57441-316-8.

Reviewed by Johannes R. Allert (Norwich University)

Published on H-War (November, 2011)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



While history of U.S. air power during World War II has traditionally focused on the events and exploits of aircrews who served in Europe, scant attention has been paid to those who served in the Southwest Pacific and even less to those who supported the offensive in the central theater. Conventional history concerning these actions generally revolves around the marine landings at Guadalcanal, Tarawa, and Iwo Jima, while the narrative for the navy focuses on decisive air victory against the Imperial Japanese Navy, later referred to as “The Great Marianas Turkey Shoot.” To date, the history of the Seventh Air Force was either limited to Kenn C. Rust’s divisional history series that provided a broad chronicle of the air divisions’ activities or more recently, the prisoner of war experience of Louis Zamperini.[1]

As the son of a World War II veteran, Phil Searce relies on several primary sources to weave a richly detailed account of his father’s personal experiences and those of his father’s squadron mates. Emblematic of his generation, Herman Searce experienced the hardships of the Great Depression and this was compounded by an unhappy home life. Seeking to break free from the confines of poverty and a broken home as well as a desire to explore the larger world, Herman lied about his age to enlist in the United States Army. He eventually served as a radio operator/gunner on B-24 Liberators that flew long-range bombing missions over the vast expanse of the Central Pacific.

In his detailed research, the author effectively avoids the false arguments that compare the Pacific to the European theater of operations. Rather, he contrasts the two and correctly concludes that each in its own way

had unique pitfalls and hardships. Emphasis on training and maintenance of aircraft and its equipment is central to the author’s story. Whether on the ground or in the air, well-trained personnel who properly cared for and maintained their equipment became critical for survival against an unforgiving climate and a hostile enemy. The primary goal became the completion of forty missions and a resulting ticket home; however, despite the quality of the equipment or the level of training and experience, there were times where fate intervened and inflicted fatal results.

Important to the story was the fact that air power was still in its adolescent phase, and theory did not always measure up to realities in actual combat. Due to the great distances involved, bombers and their crews were often placed under great strain and, at times, were forced to turn back due to mechanical failures or weather conditions. When and if they actually hit the target, it became a question as to whether or not they inflicted sufficient damage using the proper ordinance. The author aptly describes these events from the early stages of war as lessons in futility while acknowledging that compared to the Japanese, they had much to learn. Equally compelling was the fact that during the early stages of the air campaign, completing forty missions was virtually an impossible task, and it was not until later when improvements in equipment coupled with the allied advance provided crews the opportunity to do so. Along the way, Herman Searce’s input toward developing and refining radar use and radio technology facilitated the air force’s efforts to wage war against the Japanese empire.

The deep sense of loss experienced during wartime,

especially in cases where a loved one is listed as missing in action, has always been particularly painful. For the family members left behind, there is never quite the sense of closure necessary in the grieving process. Unlike Zamperini's individual experience of being temporarily listed as missing in action, or Michael Cundiff's *Ten Knights in a Bar Room: Missing in Action in the Southwest Pacific, 1943* (1990), which focuses on sense of loss and grief experienced by ten families from one crew, Scarce goes one step further.[2] By including members of the squadron who survived the war, the author achieves the overarching sense of tragedy and eternal loss felt by warrior and civilian alike during a time of world chaos. In a time when no soldier was left behind, the author's observations strike a strong chord.

Any negative criticism of the book is confined to the author's penchant to rehash some of the events that occurred previously in the story. However, in doing so, he enables readers who may be less familiar with the subject matter to maintain a sense of context within the larger narrative. Scarce's book is a salute to his father's service and an excellent tribute to those with whom he served. The reader will find the book difficult to put down and lament finishing it once complete. Fortunately, for those interested in the Pacific air campaign during World War

II, the author plans a future release focusing on B-29 Super Fortress missions over Japan.

#### Notes

[1]. In 1979, Kenn C. Rust published *Seventh Air Force Story*, one in a series of books concerning air divisions serving in combat theaters. This series was republished in soft cover format to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of World War II (Kenn C. Rust, *Seventh Air Force Story* [Terre Haute: Sunshine House, 1991]). In 2004, Louis Zamperini published an autobiographical sketch on his experiences as a prisoner of war in *Devil at My Heels: A Heroic Olympian's Astonishing Story of Survival as a Japanese POW in World War II* (New York: Perennial Library, 2004). His story was repeated in Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (New York: Random House, 2010).

[2]. Although Cundiff's *Ten Knights in a Bar Room* takes place in the Southwest and not Central Pacific, the conditions remained the same. The author went to great lengths to interview ten family members of the lost crew whose remains were finally located and recovered in 1970.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Johannes R. Allert. Review of Scarce, Phil, *Finish Forty and Home: The Untold World War II Story of B-24s in the Pacific*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. November, 2011.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34406>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.