H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carl O. Dunbar. *Before They Were the Black Sheep: Marine Fighting Squadron VMF-214 and the Battle for the Solomon Islands.* Edited by Peter M. Dunbar. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011. 305 pp. $32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3725-7.

Reviewed by Cliff Bullock
Published on H-War (March, 2012)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

An American Fighter Pilot's Experience in His Own Words

Before They Were Black Sheep is a casual read with a very subtle historical and social undercurrent. The bulk of this book consists of letters from Lt. Carl O. Dunbar written primarily to his mother. Other correspondence is included, as are memoirs and official accounts. Primary sources therefore contribute greatly to this work. These elements are woven into a relaxed narrative by Peter M. Dunbar, the book's editor and Carl's son. Dunbar, an attorney and adjunct professor at Florida State University, has authored five other books, mostly on real estate law, including *Condominium Concept: A Practical Guide for Officers, Owners and Directors of Florida Condominiums* (1986). His writing is solid and he ties his primary sources together with a constructive narrative.

The book includes a useful index of names, places, and terminology, which is often cross referenced. An annotated bibliography denotes primary sources (letters, interviews, official documents, and memoirs) and secondary sources (primarily popular historical works on WWII in the Pacific), in particular Bruce Gamble's *The Black Sheep: The Definitive Account of Marine Fighting Squadron 214 in World War II* (1998).

In chapter 1, Carl Dunbar's letters reveal firsthand observations about the U-boat war off the American coast in 1942. It incorporates a wealth of detail about the thorough training received by naval pilots as the war began. Types of training aircraft are discussed, along with poignant personal correspondence. This chapter points to the quality and quantity of training along with personal realities about wartime relationships.

Chapter 2 gives the reader a sense of opulent organization about the pilot training program with which Dunbar was involved. The number and types of aircraft flown by young American pilots in training were impressive. The length of training and sheer scope of the American preparation for a long total war are apparent in this chapter. Pilots were not being rushed into combat and those showing promise were often kept at home to train others. Other combatants in WWII surely could not afford this luxury. As the air war intensified and became a protracted struggle, the highly trained and well-equipped American airman had a distinct advantage in combat. Chapter 2, and indeed the entire book, drives this point home.

In chapter 6, as with most of the book, it is obvious that American pilots got liberal and effective leave between combat tours and base reassignment. Carl writes home constantly of the little things he saw and experienced. One is left with the earnest impression that he was trying to leave a record of beauty and reflection behind just in case he did not come home. The small every day experiences are in sharp focus in many of Carl's letters and stand in stark contrast to the war. Carl glossed over the ugliness and constantly assured his mother in his letters that he and his unit were in good spirits. Operationally, Carl's letters reinforced a feeling of strong organization and planning by marine aviation coupled with very serious attempts to rescue and preserve the lives of these highly skilled combat pilots.

Peter Dunbar wraps up this work without including letters from Carl's third tour. The "Swashbucklers" of VMF-214 were broken up and assigned to other units possibly to disseminate their experiences in the F4U-1 Corsair fighter. Sadly, Carl's letters from this period did not survive. *Before They Were Black Sheep* stands out as a simple glimpse into the effectiveness and scope of American pilot training programs and provides insight into the subtle loving bonds between family members in war. The reader is also treated to a very thoughtful and quietly revealing journey that would have been lovely had the world not been trying to destroy itself.

There is one factual error in chapter 2. Peter Dun-

bar credits the destruction of three Japanese aircraft carriers at the Battle of Midway to high-level TBD-1 Devastator torpedo bombers. In fact, they were destroyed by SBD Dauntless dive bombers. Despite this and the lack of an an academic tack to *Before They Were Black Sheep*, I found the book an enjoyable read and not without historical merit. Well-written personal accounts are rare. I found historical and personal value in this book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Cliff Bullock. Review of Dunbar, Carl O., *Before They Were the Black Sheep: Marine Fighting Squadron VMF-214 and the Battle for the Solomon Islands.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. March, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34734

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