

BOOK REVIEW

Bloody Sixteen: The USS Oriskany and Air Wing 16 during the Vietnam War, by Peter Fey. Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2018. 393 pp.

On the morning of 23 July 1966, a pair of A-4 Skyhawks roared above the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin, headed for a strike on North Vietnamese petroleum facilities near Vinh. As he descended on his bombing run, CDR Wynn Foster abruptly encountered a veritable storm of anti-aircraft fire, then heard an ominous crash directly in his cockpit. The fear of every aviator had abruptly become his reality.

“I realized I had been hit,” recalled Foster, “and looked down at my right arm. The arm was missing from the elbow down and half my right forearm was lying on the starboard console.” Struggling to maintain control of the Skyhawk with his left hand, Foster remarkably succeeded in escaping the gauntlet of anti-aircraft fire and making his way out of North Vietnamese airspace. Nearly passing out from loss of blood, Foster succeeded in ejecting into the Gulf of Tonkin, where the crew of a waiting American destroyer rescued him.

For good reason, Foster’s herculean effort for survival became a legend among naval aviators. With the release of *Bloody Sixteen: The USS Oriskany and Air Wing 16 during the Vietnam War*, author Peter Fey has penned an engrossing contribution to the literature on America’s most painful conflict of the twentieth century. By chronicling the experiences of one of the Vietnam War’s most storied carrier air wings, the author pays fitting homage to the rare breed of naval fliers who endured the intense crucible of air war over Southeast Asia.

Fey focuses his efforts on the *Oriskany*, a legendary carrier whose air wing was crucial to the execution of Operation Rolling Thunder, the Johnson administration’s bombing campaign over North Vietnam. The *Oriskany* was initially deployed to the South China Sea during the spring of 1965, and the pilots of Air Wing 16 would serve three combat tours from Yankee Station, the navy’s front-line staging ground for operations over North Vietnam.

This book grippingly chronicles the intense aerial combat that took place in the skies over North Vietnam. Fey explores the careers and missions of the unheralded pilots of Air Wing 16, which was initially under the command of CDR James Stockdale. An archetypical naval aviator, who led by example, Stockdale was instrumental in forging the air wing into a professional outfit capable of carrying out extraordinarily difficult assignments.

As the war progressed, those missions grew increasingly perilous. Highly effective communist anti-aircraft artillery, paired with state-of-the-art Soviet surface-to-air missiles (SAM) and MiGs, played havoc with the undermanned and overtaxed crew of the *Oriskany*. Mounting combat losses and tragic operational

mishaps exacted a grim toll from the air wing. Due to overweening Pentagon frugality, munitions were often in woefully short supply or were badly outdated surplus left over from World War II.

In a misguided effort to execute Rolling Thunder with one eye trained to domestic political considerations, the Johnson administration instituted a crippling series of ever-changing rules of engagement, fluctuating target lists, and sortie demands. The Pentagon's operational meddling and fixation with sortie counts likewise encouraged questionable tactical decisions. Writes Fey, "carriers often launched four plane flights with one bomb each—four sorties and four bombs, when one sortie could have carried all four bombs" (p. 49).

Despite the hopes of the Johnson administration, such micromanagement of an ever-expanding air war failed to force the communist North into fruitful negotiations and instead increased the danger to the pilots of Air Wing 16. The air war alone could never subdue an intransigent North Vietnam, a fact that was obvious to the men on the front lines. CDR Wynn Foster noted that "By December of 1965, all of us realized it was not a winnable war. It was obvious to us, and obvious to everybody flying over there, we couldn't hit the North Vietnamese where it hurt" (p. 108).

Not surprisingly, the primary author of the Pentagon's bureaucratic constraints, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, comes across poorly in Fey's account. Oddly enough, Secretary McNamara eventually made a personal appearance on the *Oriskany* during the autumn of 1966. McNamara was at the receiving end of sailors' derision; anonymous aviators surreptitiously gifted the secretary a *Peanuts* cartoon that hinted at munitions shortages and proverbial "silver bullets." The account of McNamara's visit to the *Oriskany*, which includes his interaction with an inebriated pilot, lends a much-needed dose of levity to an otherwise sobering volume.

The saga of Air Wing 16 is likewise a troubling reminder of the perils inherent to institutionalized overconfidence. Although American pilots were far more experienced and better trained than their communist counterparts at the outset of Rolling Thunder, those advantages eventually evaporated as the North Vietnamese made substantial strides in air-to-air and surface-to-air capabilities. "In 1968," writes Fey, "the tables turned, with the VPAF [Vietnamese People's Air Force] downing more aircraft than they lost" (p. 252).

The grim experience of combat ultimately produced veteran North Vietnamese pilots and anti-aircraft crews; an influx of military hardware from the Soviets and Red China, particularly advanced SAMs, inflicted crippling losses. By the end of the conflict, Air Wing 16 had endured three combat deployments and suffered badly in the process.

Despite mounting losses to its air wing, the crew of the *Oriskany* endured a perhaps harder fate that same autumn. Due to a tragic mishandling of flares, an uncontrollable fire broke out on the *Oriskany* on 26 October 1966. The stricken carrier was pulled out of the line for repairs, but the human toll was far worse. 156 men were injured in the conflagration, and forty-four, including 24 aviators, lost their lives.

Although the author explains the overall strategic background in which the *Oriskany* operated, at the heart of the story are the yeoman warriors who were tasked with waging the air war over North Vietnam. Fey limns a sympathetic portrait of the aviators who, due to politically motivated restrictions, were hamstrung as they placed their lives in jeopardy. Their dedication in the face of such adversity renders their service all the more remarkable.

In addition to harrowing accounts of aerial combat, the author likewise explores the experiences of the men who perhaps endured the most for their country: the aviators who were shot down over the communist North and spent years in confinement. Fey's coverage of their suffering is a healthy reminder that the greatest heroes are often not the warriors who triumph on the battlefield but instead the prisoners of war who stoically endure horrific brutality alongside their brothers in arms.

A former naval officer and instructor at the Naval Strike and Air Warfare Center, author Peter Fey is well familiarized with his subject matter. Fey conducted wide-ranging interviews with veterans who experienced the war from the deck of the *Oriskany*, and the scope of the volume's endnotes and bibliography reveal extensive research into both primary and secondary sources, including the official command histories of the USS *Oriskany* and Air Wing 16, as well as the National Archives' Combat Air Activities Files for Operation Rolling Thunder.

Exhaustive in scope and engaging in tone, Peter Fey's *Bloody Sixteen* is highly recommended for students of naval aviation as well as casual readers with an interest in America's troubled experience in Vietnam.

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