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David Sears, *Pacific Air: How Fearless Flyboys, Peerless Aircraft, and Fast Flattops Conquered the Skies in the War with Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2011. Pp 372. ISBN 978-0-306-81948-3.

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Pacific Air is intended for a general audience of history and aviation enthusiasts. The focus is on dramatic stories of the air war in the Pacific, concentrating on carrier-based naval aviators who flew Wildcat, Hellcat, and Avenger aircraft. The book's themes are the role of the Grumman Aircraft Corporation in producing the aircraft, the aviators and their stories, the struggles between aviators and surface navy "Gun Club" leaders, and the development of carrier vs. carrier battles up to the Battle of the Philippine Sea (June 1944).

David Sears, a former US Navy officer with sea duty and in-country Vietnam experience, holds a master's degree in Industrial Relations and has worked for the New York Times organization and Dow Jones and Company. He is also the author of four previous naval and naval aviation history books, including the well regarded *Such Men As These*.¹ His résumé does not list any flying experience.

Pacific Air is largely a compilation of "sea stories," anecdotes of aviation training and combat sorties, culled from previously published biographies and reminiscences. There is some original material from interviews and correspondence with three navy veterans, but, except for a few training anecdotes, the new information encompasses only a few pages near the end of the volume.

In a book of this type, the author's responsibilities are to write in an engaging (and, for his target audience, entertaining) manner, to select representative anecdotes and render them truthfully, and to provide accurate background history and technical references, correctly setting the context of the story.

Sears writes in an engaging and fluent manner, deftly selecting the telling fact or compelling incident to bring his subject to life. As for entertainment, his book is a "fun read." But his style also has problems, including purple patches and clumsy grammar and syntax:²

But on this chaotic and darkening day, fate stalked three of the men—theirs was a blood bond deeper than even shared traditions or camaraderie.... In the next months stretching into years, it would snuff the lives (to enemy fire, captivity, or torture; to aircraft malfunctions, collisions, and crashes; to darkness, fog or typhoons; to drowning, exposure, starvation, dehydration, hypoxia, hypothermia or vertigo; to hesitation or overconfidence; to uncounted instances of the unknowable) of a third of the men who ventured from aircraft carrier decks over a hostile, pitiless and seemingly boundless Pacific Ocean (14-15).

In addition, Sears divides and subdivides his book into five parts, twenty chapters, and 373 breaks within chapters to mark topic changes. The Demon Barber of Fleet Street could not have dismembered the text more thoroughly.

Most of the book is fragmented into hundreds of vignettes, ranging from a single paragraph to a page or so in length. Story threads shift faster than cuts in an MTV video. The yarns are mostly in chronological order, but with flashbacks. The reader will need a photographic memory to keep track of the main characters: over 260 aviators and another fifty or sixty commanders or civilians are mentioned. An individual might be introduced and then vanish for a hundred pages or never reappear. Despite such stylistic and organizational infelicities, Sears does manage to keep the action rolling.

1. Subtitle: *The Story of the Navy Pilots Who Flew the Deadly Skies over Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2010).

2. Sears loves parenthetical phrases and semicolons. On page 300, e.g., a single seventy-three-word sentence sports two dashes, five sets of parentheses, and three semicolons. Another irritating stylistic impulse is a journalistic fussiness in listing (parenthetically, of course) the age of each character who is introduced.

Much of the material here derives from previously published accounts. Unfortunately, not all the stories are rendered accurately. For example, Japanese ace Saburo Sakai, in his autobiography,³ describes his first fighter engagement, over China, against the Chinese—a prolonged encounter with lots of maneuvering and firing. He eventually destroys his opponent with the last of his ammunition (30).

Sears reduces the thrilling dogfight to a fluke incident where “in ... one prolonged burst, [Sakai] had expended all his ammunition” (57)—an entirely different story. He also rather luridly castigates Sakai's superior officers, who had “dangled him as bait only to rescue him from the enemy predator's hungry jaws. It was a cruel initiation rite that could easily have spelled his end” (57). But according to Sakai, “Anticipating that I might fumble with my controls in my first combat—as I did!—the flight leader had assigned one of the veteran pilots to cover my plane from behind” (29–30). The prescient leader of Sakai's account has become a nasty prankster in Sears's.

The book's background history and references to technical subjects have many significant errors. A small sampling: Sears says Germany's blitzkrieg was “unleashed against Northern Europe in August 1939” (80) instead of September. He claims that, at the beginning of the war, Adm. Ernest King, the Chief of Naval Operations, agreed with MacArthur in wanting to advance through the “Solomon Islands, New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago” (112). But King actually believed the proper route was via the Central Pacific in accordance with the navy's long-established Warplan ORANGE. The 1942 Lae/Salamaua strikes were not “a huge success” (118); rather, they were a severe disappointment, plagued by poor bombing accuracy. Sears calls the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) losses at Guadalcanal—two battleships, one carrier, five cruisers, twelve destroyers, and eight submarines—“equal in scope to the IJN's entire pre-war strength” (257). But IJN assets on 6 December 1941 totaled ten battleships, ten carriers, thirty-eight cruisers, 108 destroyers, and sixty-eight submarines.

In an account of a carrier battle, Sears writes that aerial torpedo strikes at 2:44 p.m. “sealed *Yorktown's* fate” although “it would take hours (stretching into days) of indecision and struggle before *Yorktown* finally sank” (179). The actual time was 4:20 p.m. and the ship was being successfully salvaged when it was sunk the following afternoon by an (unmentioned) Japanese submarine. Sears invariably calls bombs that hit carriers “armor-piercing,” but Japanese dive bombers did not use AP ordnance. He also claims that, after a Japanese bombardment of Guadalcanal, “butt plates of fourteen and eighteen-inch rounds lay everywhere” (231); in fact, no Japanese ship mounting eighteen-inch guns ever bombarded Guadalcanal. Sears states that thirty-two *Essex*-class carriers were under construction or on order by August 1942 (263); the correct number is twenty-three. He claims that conversion of *Cleveland*-class cruisers to light carriers was “necessitated by 1942's devastating carrier attrition at Coral Sea [4–8 May], Midway [4–7 June] and Guadalcanal [August 1942–February 1943]”; but the conversions had already begun in January 1942 and six of the nine were on order before the Battle of the Coral Sea. Sears gives the deck armor of the battleship *California* as fourteen inches, when it was actually 5.5 inches.

Besides such disconcertingly frequent specific errors of fact, Sears also perpetuates a myth, manufactures history outright, and does a serious disservice to a living veteran.

As a major theme of his book, Sears spreads the fable that surface officers—the “Gun Club”—saw aviation's value solely as providing the scouting eyes of the Battle Force. In this, he follows earlier aviation propagandists' exaggeration of the “Aviators vs. Gun Club” conflict—a story line overturned by recent research revealing a more cooperative, less acrimonious process in developing carrier doctrine.⁴ But Sears prefers to give his audience an opportunity to cheer the aviators and jeer the surface officers.

Sears also meddles with history. In his version of a press conference held by Adm. John Towers, Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics, Towers says “It's the aircraft carrier that will spearhead the action in the next war.’ Sensing both Towers' unease and the sort of firestorm that such a statement might ignite in the Navy's

3. *Samurai! The Personal Story of Japan's Greatest Living Fighter Pilot* (1957; rpt. Annapolis, MD: Naval Inst Pr, 2010), which Sears cites as his source.

4. See, e.g., Thomas Hone et al., *American and British Aircraft Carrier Development, 1919–1941* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Inst Pr, 1999).

Gun Club ranks and the halls of Congress, one reporter asked him to repeat” (72). Sears is tracking here the account in Thomas Buell’s *Master of Sea Power*,⁵ which says “The reporters at first were silent. Finally one spoke: ‘Will you repeat that, Admiral?’” Note that Sears has simply fabricated the reporter’s “sense” of “Towers’ unease” and anticipation of a “firestorm” of criticism in Gun Club ranks and among congressmen.

Worse, the fabrication is inaccurate. Sears presents Towers’s statement as an attack against battleship proponents, in line with his aviators vs. Gun Club theme. This is entirely out of character for Towers and inconsistent with his previous relations with surface officers. In fact, he was reacting to an entirely different crisis—a national shortage of machine tools. The Army Air Force (AAF) wanted to speed up the production of heavy bombers and take priority over naval aviation for critical materials. Towers was staking a claim for naval aviation equality with the AAF, not attacking the “Gun Club.”⁶

In another story, Sears relates a tale about Admiral King’s alleged dislike for Vice Adm. Wilson Brown: in February 1942, when Brown, commanding the *Lexington*, communicated his desperate need for provisioning, King snapped: “Carry on as long as you have hardtack, beans, and corn willy. What the hell are you worrying about?” (113–14). John B. Lundstrom has depicted the incident in *Black Shoe Carrier Admiral*⁷ (not cited by Sears): *Lexington* was nearly out of food and Brown requested permission to draw on supplies from a forward stores ship before departing on a return voyage to Pearl Harbor. King, who was anxious to build up forward stockpiles for later use, sent Brown a message to eat “beans and hardtack.” *Lexington*’s crew made the transit subsisting largely on beans and canned spinach.

Sears’s version, for which no source is cited, has the sniff of contrivance. How, for example, could King have “snapped” at Brown, who was half a world away? And even the crusty King would not have written “What the hell are you worrying about?” in a naval message. As for “corn willy” (not mentioned by Lundstrom), a WW I doughboy dish mixing corn beef, bacon grease, canned tomatoes or potatoes, and canned corn (ingredients the *Lexington* did not have), it would have been a feast compared to beans and spinach.

In the immediately following paragraphs, Sears mentions Frank Jack Fletcher, whose biography⁸ is in his bibliography, so he may have found this incident there. He has either juiced up the story for his audience of casual readers by inventing a dramatic quotation or failed to verify his memory before writing. Each is unacceptable. Sears turns a justifiable decision by King into a petulant clash of personalities, in the process generating a phony quotation to be cited by unwary future historians.

The most significant defect in *Pacific Air*, however, is Sears’s reprehensible treatment of Alvin Kernan, the rear gunner in a TBF Avenger torpedo bomber the night when Lt. Cdr. Edward “Butch” O’Hare, winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, was shot down and killed. According to Sears: “[Kernan] opened up on the intruder with a long burst. From his vantage point at the starboard window of the TBF, Rand [the belly gunner], now in some pain from his wounded foot, saw tracers stream down towards the starboard Hellcat [my emphasis]. With his ammunition expended, Kernan watched the intruder break away to port and disappear. Then the starboard Hellcat dropped off to port as well” (288).

That is, Kernan shot down O’Hare. But that is untrue: an official navy inquiry totally exonerated Kernan, as Sears should have known from accounts of this famous event in navy records, O’Hare’s biography⁹ (listed in Sears’s bibliography), or even an extensive *Wikipedia* article (s.v. “Edward O’Hare”), all of which clear Kernan.

In Kernan’s own account of the engagement¹⁰ (not cited by Sears), one senses the anguish he suffered as the man who (might have) killed Butch O’Hare. Now, Sears does refer later to another pilot’s desire for re-

5. Subtitle: *A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980) 343 (not 363, as cited by Sears).

6. Indeed, contemporary task force tactics employed by surface officers had already placed the carrier in the spearhead of operations. See Clark G. Reynolds, *Admiral John H. Towers: The Struggle for Naval Air Supremacy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Inst Pr, 1991) 350–57.

7. Subtitle: *Frank Jack Fletcher at Coral Sea, Midway, and Guadalcanal* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Inst Pr, 1991) 95.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Steve Ewing and John B. Lundstrom, *Fateful Rendezvous: The Life of Butch O’Hare* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Inst Pr, 2004).

10. *Crossing the Line: A Bluejacket’s Odyssey in World War II* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2007).

venge on the Japanese “after learning of Butch O’Hare’s loss to a [Japanese] Betty” (291), but this is far from unequivocally absolving Kernan. He should have made it clear that O’Hare was shot down by the Japanese and praised Kernan for engaging the Betty under perilous night-flying conditions. An honorable, still-living veteran deserved no less.

Overall, *Pacific Air* has all the hallmarks of a book hurriedly manufactured as a follow-up to the author’s successful work on naval aviation in Korea. In rewriting history to dramatize a story for his envisioned audience, Sears makes mistakes of both historical and technical detail and broader interpretation. His book will entertain military buffs interested in rousing tales of fighter pilots “yankin’ and bankin’” in aerial combat. Those who value historical accuracy should look elsewhere.