



## *Bloody Sixteen: The USS Oriskany and Air Wing 16 during the Vietnam War*

by Peter Fey.

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On 9 September 1965, (then) Cdr. James Stockdale's A-4 Skyhawk, flying over North Vietnam, was ripped apart by flak. As he ejected, about to begin eight years as a POW in the "Hanoi Hilton," he comforted himself with the advice the stoic philosopher Epictetus gave his students to accept circumstances that were beyond their control.<sup>1</sup> And, indeed, a core theme of *Bloody Sixteen* is that in Vietnam the men of the USS *Oriskany* struggled bravely against forces beyond their control, rendered powerless by ineffective leaders and the vagaries of fate.

One might wonder why another telling of the story of the *Oriskany* is necessary, since it was the subject of journalist Zalin Grant's bestseller, *Over the Beach*.<sup>2</sup> Fey answers simply, "because they [the surviving crew members] asked me to" (xii). In addition, unlike Grant, who focused on individual pilots, Fey takes a broader view of Air Wing 16 in the context of the war in Vietnam. He also discusses President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's efforts to create clear goals for Operation Rolling Thunder (2 Mar. 1965–2 Nov. 1968).

The *Oriskany* took heavier damage than any aircraft carrier involved in the Vietnam War. During Rolling Thunder, it was one of a number of *Essex*-class and larger carriers in action, but it lost sixty-one aircraft, about 16 percent of all US Navy combat losses during the operation (17). Taking account of all causes, including two massive fires, the ship lost over half its planes and nearly a third of its pilots,<sup>3</sup> earning the nickname "Bloody Sixteen" (251). Fey details these ordeals with up-close, personal narratives.

Fey discusses the experiences of American POWs, including John McCain, who showed resilience and courage in torturous conditions. Nor does he omit the wives of these men, who underwent a torture all their own. Stockdale's wife Sybil, in particular, became a powerful advocate for prisoners and their families.

The author stresses the vital role of leadership styles and personal relationships in military actions. The war strained these relationships as losses mounted and the men of the *Oriskany* adapted to stress in a high-pressure environment. Fey sees many of the stereotypical "fighter-jock" behaviors as coping mechanisms.

Military historians and other experts will find little that is new here. Fey has consulted some archival sources (mostly official unit histories), but most of the stories he tells (granted, very well) come from the secondary literature.<sup>4</sup>

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1. See, further, Stockdale's speech "The Stoic Warrior's Triad: Tranquility, Fearlessness, and Freedom," delivered at the Marine Amphibious Warfare School on 18 Apr. 1995—available online.

2. Subtitle: *The Air War in Vietnam* (NY: Norton, 1986).

3. Including Lt. Cdr. John McCain, whose A-4 Skyhawk was shot down by a missile over Hanoi on 26 Oct. 1967.

4. His source citations are too often inaccurate or missing altogether. E.g., the number he gives for American aircraft shot down by Chinese pilots does not match the number given in his source—Xiaoming Zhang, "The Vietnam War,

Near the end of the book, Fey criticizes the published works on the war as “all too often, ... emotional, anecdotal, and argumentative. They convey the author’s polarized passions but do little to explain them” (276). While that is certainly true, Fey’s own attempt to present an objective history falls short. He presents contextual material in a measured and accurate fashion, clarifying the drawbacks of the gradual approach and the micro-management of the bombing campaign, but also explaining LBJ’s justified fear of widening the war. But, by the end of the volume, he holds Johnson and McNamara personally responsible for the war because they were “arrogant ... and ignorant” (279). He excoriates military leaders for not protesting against their commander in chief’s strategic mistakes, singling out the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen. Earle Wheeler, as incompetent due to his lack of combat experience. He goes so far as to argue that “Rolling Thunder nearly succeeded,” but that Johnson “emasculated” it (252, 258), without adducing any hard evidence for such a claim. The bombing campaign, even when it hit its targets, could not stem the flow of supplies to the South Vietnamese insurgency.

Historian Mark Clodfelter has concluded that Rolling Thunder “could never provide more than token support to Johnson’s political objectives,” owing to “the failure of civilian and military leaders to appreciate the type of warfare waged by the enemy.”<sup>5</sup> Early in his book, Fey agrees with Clodfelter that Rolling Thunder was ill-conceived to begin with, but admits the cogency of claims that Johnson and his advisors were right to fear interference by China and/or the Soviet Union. The idea that bombing would have ended the war, had Johnson lifted restrictions earlier, has been fiercely debated.<sup>6</sup> Fey’s attribution of Johnson’s failures to his navigating the space between hawks and doves without fully committing to either is a common theme in much of the literature on the war.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Peter Fey’s intent is not to push the field of history in new directions or argue for a novel thesis. Rather, he has succeeded in telling a complicated story in a lively style, with due attention to its wider historical context and the emotional lives of its participants. *Bloody Sixteen* offers a gripping introduction to the naval air war in Vietnam, well suited to stimulate fruitful discussions in undergraduate classrooms.

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1964–1969: A Chinese Perspective,” *Journal of Military History* 60 (1996) 731–62—nor does he give its correct page numbers (23).

5. *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1989) 145, 117.

6. See, in favor, Barret Tillman and John Nichols, *On Yankee Station: The Naval Air War over Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1987), and, opposed, Clodfelter, *ibid.*

7. See, e.g., James Olsen and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945–2010* (NY: Wiley, 2013).