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"The Magnificent Mitscher" and "Admiral John H. Towers: The Struggle for Naval Air Supremacy"

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Taylor, Theodore. *The Magnificent Mitscher*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1991. (Reprint W.W. Norton, 1954) 364pp. \$26.95

Reynolds, Clark G. *Admiral John H. Towers: The Struggle for Naval Air Supremacy*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1991. 667pp. \$37.95

One of the legends of World War II was Marc A. "Pete" Mitscher. He epitomized naval combat in World War II as a fighting carrier admiral and carved his name indelibly in the history of our navy. Not much is known about his private thoughts; he destroyed all his personal papers in what his champions call excessive modesty. Though modest, he was nonetheless hard-bitten, taciturn, and thoroughly competent. The American naval victories over Japan are in great part due to his command of the USS *Hornet*. In its initial foray into the Pacific war the ship carried the B-25 bombers to within six hundred miles of Japan for the first air raid over Tokyo.

Prior to the war, Mitscher tried to convince the battleship admirals (known as the "gun club") that aircraft could in effect carry a 16-inch shell ten times as far as a battleship could fire it, and with better accuracy. But he and his brother fliers in naval aviation were riding with the wind when disaster overtook the battle line at Pearl Harbor.

But Mitscher is best remembered—and earned undying fame and affection—for his command during the Battle of the Philippine Sea, also

known as the Marianas Turkey Shoot. It had been a great victory marred only by the fear of heavy losses during the return flight.

It was night, and as a matter of course the entire task force was kept in total darkness. Mitscher's task group fliers on their return flight from battle were exhilarated but worn out from combat, and they were low on fuel. They were desperate for a safe haven but could not find their carriers. Contrary to orders and all tradition, in his thin but commanding voice, Mitscher gave the unequivocal order, "Turn on the lights!"

On the ships' bridges and decks, repeated by radio and innumerable telephone messages throughout the task force, Mitscher's words became the paean of gratitude and respect for our fighting aviators and a reminder of the risks everyone must take in a game with such high stakes.

Every ship in the task force defiantly lighted its decks, and the tough fighting men cheered with a catch in their throats as the powerful searchlights stabbed the sky. Gratefully the planes landed, some with barely a spoonful of fuel left in their tanks. When the tallies were in, all but sixteen pilots and twenty-two crewmen had been saved.

The aircraft carrier was born into battle with the attack on Pearl Harbor and has remained a part of naval battle throughout its entire history. Naval aviation ruled the Navy from Pearl Harbor, and today, despite the rise of nuclear submarines, it is still the carrier that is the spearhead of our national

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purpose in distant places. Much of this is due to Pete Mitscher and the fighting admirals he helped to create.

Theodore Taylor has produced a magnificent work. He served in the Navy and the merchant marine, was a newspaper reporter and ultimately an associate producer with Paramount Pictures.

Originally published in 1954, this biography is written with humor, compassion, and deep respect. Taylor has fully captured his subject. After reading this work the reader might conclude that those lights were not first turned on in the Philippine Sea but at the beginning of Mitscher's naval career.

Clark Reynolds has chosen a very different character for his subject: John H. Towers. Mitscher was a man you loved and followed instinctively. Towers was a man you deeply respected, even feared, but only followed because you had to.

Several years Mitscher's senior, Towers too was a fighting man, and a man of action. He fought the good fight for naval air, including the battle of unification, long before it became a byword in the national media, but his analytical mind and political finesse ruffled feathers and created enemies. Despite this, if he had possessed the leadership qualities of a Nimitz, Mitscher, or an Arleigh Burke he might still have achieved his ambition of a fighting command during the war, but his aggressive life-long search for personal and political support led him to the career he was in fact forced

to engage in. His dream would remain unrealized.

But Towers's air expertise was so great and his dexterity as an air logistician so outstanding he could not be ignored. His influence was pervasive everywhere the air war was fought. It was he who was responsible for making the right aircraft, weapons, and equipment available (quickly designed and quickly produced) to counter the surprising Japanese Zero and its companion planes. It is not an exaggeration to say that Towers was the mastermind of our naval aviation forces during the most critical period of prewar development. As the fighting waxed hotter, he continued to provide the improvements needed to meet battle contingencies that crowded upon the home base.

When the war was over, Towers was finally awarded the recognition he had long desired. The Navy gave him command of the Pacific Fleet along with the fourth star: he was a full admiral. Many felt the star at least was long overdue.

Clark Reynolds is a born researcher. It is obvious that early on he had to decide whether to write about Towers the man or his fight for the issues that were important to him. It would have been half the work if he had written about the man. To Reynold's credit, he chose the other; not far into the book, the reader becomes aware of learning less about Towers the man than about the specific progress of the detailed infighting between the services, the three-sided war between MacArthur,²

Nimitz, and King, and their uneasy struggle to control the sweep of events in which they found themselves. Reynolds has thus offered us an account of the architecture of our naval air power, its battles for political survival, and the extraordinary complexity of its war effort.

Deliberately or not, Clark Reynolds, historian *par excellence*, has written what may well be the definitive history of naval aviation. This is an eminently superior book.

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Bartlett, Merrill. *Lejeune: A Marine's Life, 1867-1942*. Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1991. 214pp. \$24.95

Bartlett's biography of John A. Lejeune may soon replace Lejeune's autobiography of 1930, *Reminiscences of a Marine* (reprinted by the Marine Corps Association in 1979), as the definitive source of information about the man who is regarded by most as America's premier "Soldier an' Sailor Too."

Bartlett thinks that Lejeune richly deserved the towering reputation he enjoyed even before he wrote his autobiography. Lejeune had served with unparalleled distinction in not one but two U.S. Marine Corps. The first was really a colonial constabulary composed of first cousins of Kipling's Royal Marine, who was always "doin' all kinds of things . . . like landin' himself with a Gatling gun, talkin' to

them 'eathen kings." In that Corps, the shy, brilliant bayou boy more than held his own with ferocious seniors like Littleton Waller, Tazewell Waller, and frenetic juniors like Smedley Butler.

But when that generation of "bush-whackers" became an embarrassing anachronism, Lejeune and his followers invented a second, vastly more complicated Marine Corps and lived just long enough to see it usher in the Golden Age of Amphibious Warfare by storming ashore to glory on Guadalcanal.

The most obvious superiority of the new publication is that Bartlett has given us, where Lejeune did not, illuminating notes at the end of each chapter. Another advantage is the mountain of material that has come to light since the death of Lejeune in 1942.

A random side-by-side, page-by-page comparison of the two books establishes Bartlett's as the more readable, perhaps because he does not handicap himself, as Lejeune did in his penultimate paragraph of his book, with the "earnest hope that no word I have written will cause any one pain." (The general obviously did not know that autobiographies are *supposed* to cause pain.) Bartlett often acknowledges his debt to *Reminiscences*. He displays his respect for the book, General Lejeune, and the reader by not nit-picking.

The author reveals much about Lejeune in the few sentences he devotes specifically to *Reminiscences*: "Lejeune was 67 and the Superintendent of Virginia Military Institute