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The Jolly Rogers

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counterpoint among the nuclear family of nations.

The remaining essays are interesting, but certainly not "essential." As a text the book has great limitations, one being its lack of relevance to today's world. With the exception of the three essays mentioned, the book has limited use for the student of warfare or strategy. The "intelligent general reader" may find the book of interest, but others will be disappointed for its lack of forward-thinking. Perhaps it is true that historians are best at predicting the past.

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Blackburn, Tom. *The Jolly Rogers*.
New York: Orion Books, 1989.
260pp. \$22.95

Ah, for the good ol' days, back to the last one that we won, when real fighter aircraft had 6X.50s, and real fighter pilots wore leather helmets and Marine Corps issue field shoes, and cooled their beer at 30,000 feet in the wing-ammo-cans and went to Australia for R&R.

Tommy "Big Hog" Blackburn, a real ace of a WWII fighter pilot, recounts his memories as skipper of VF-17, in his book, *The Jolly Rogers*. His memories are unusually sharp and detailed—nearly 45 years after the fact, with the authentic ring of sea stories often told over many beers at happy hours, and at the inevitable tail-hookers' reunions in Las Vegas.

Blackburn focuses on two main points: "Big Hog," the beautiful F4U-gull-wing-Japanese-Zero-killing-machine, which he and his squadron can bring aboard any U.S.S. Boat around; and his combat training/screening system, implemented in the VF-17 Jolly Rogers squadron to select and develop the type of fighter pilots required to win a war.

Blackburn's system was to select pilots for their aggressiveness, intelligence, endurance and loyalty, then put them in their "offices," i.e. the cockpits, and "drill"; that is, to fly simulated-combat and low-level missions, day, night and in all weather conditions, until the man becomes part of the machine and all apprehensions about night and weather disappear. For seasoning, throw in the typical fighter pilot's disdain for spit and polish, a pilot's "de rigueur" abhorrence of the mud and wrenches of aircraft maintenance and logistics, add a dozen nonconforming individualists (NCIs) who might last 5 minutes in the polished passageways of the admiral's flagship, perhaps less in the pompous portals of today's Pentagon, and slow-cook in the 20-20 hindsight of the author who was "... horrified [and] ... incredulous at the ineptitude of our Pacific commanders [following Pearl Harbor]."

Proof of the pudding, they say, is in the eating, and the resulting VF-17 Jolly Rogers had Japanese Zekes, Hamps and Tonys for breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks: 154.5 kills

in 76 days of combat. The dozen plus 3 NCIs, including the author, became fighter Aces (5 or more kills), but 13 pilots didn't come home (MIA/KIA). The impact on the Japanese war plans resulted in the evacuation of all remaining Japanese aircraft from Rabaul, which up till then had been a major threat to U.S. ships and ground forces. The disintegration of an empire had begun.

Aircraft logistics and maintenance, Blackburn's second theme of this shoot'em-up, were, of course, crucial to the Pacific victory. As the author points out, VF-17 and their F4U-1As were flown off the *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) upon arrival at Pearl Harbor in October 1943 because of logistics and provisioning problems, not because of carrier landing problems. *The Bunker Hill* had been the only carrier with F4Us aboard. All other carrier-based fighter squadrons had F6F Hellcats or, in the case of smaller ships, F4F Wildcats. Even so, the Jolly Rogers in November '43 launched from Ondongo, New Georgia, to provide combat air patrol for the carriers *Essex*, *Bunker Hill* and *Independence* while those ships' air groups pounded Rabaul, landed aboard to rearm and refuel, and launched again to provide fighter cover while the air groups returned from the Rabaul strike, scoring 18 kills, blunting the Japanese counterstrike, and recovered back to New Georgia. The lesson is to make the fighters simple, make lots of 'em, and keep the parts coming: a lesson lost in 1990 with \$500M bombers and \$50M fighters.

One of the ironies that Blackburn discovered at the end of his combat tour was that he had occasionally lost fighters in the extreme effort to protect the bombers being escorted, only to discover later that the bombers were primarily bait to draw Japanese fighters, the primary targets. The effects of bombing land targets were minimal in the southwest Pacific in 1943-44 and in southeast Asia in the 1960s-70s. The effects of shooting down Japanese fighters were maximal in 1943-44 and in shooting down U.S. fighters over North Vietnam in the 1960s-70s. An airplane in 1943 was a weapon to protect the ships and divisions of soldiers and marines who won the last one that we won.

Well done to the Jolly Rogers of 1943-44 who did their job. And a Hail Mary for the ships and divisions of soldiers and marines of Korea and Vietnam, and to those of the 1990s.

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Hickam, Homer M., Jr. *Torpedo Junction*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1989. 367pp. \$24.95

This is a great book! Homer Hickam has done a thorough job of researching his subject—reviewing U.S. and German records and logs, reviewing newspapers from the era as well as other books on the subject, interviewing participants and, as a skilled scuba diver, even visiting some of the wrecks.