

Naval War College Review

Volume 71
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 19

2018

Never Call Me a Hero: A Legendary American Dive-Bomber Pilot Remembers the Battle of Midway

Andrew J. Roscoe

N. Jack Kleiss

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Roscoe, Andrew J. and Kleiss, N. Jack (2018) "Never Call Me a Hero: A Legendary American Dive-Bomber Pilot Remembers the Battle of Midway," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 71 : No. 4 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol71/iss4/19>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

has been reached, it is the primary responsibility of senior military leaders to fight the war in accordance with *jus in bello* norms. Convincingly, through historical references and extrapolations, Dubik demonstrates that successful wars have been won not only on the basis of tactical excellence but also on the strategic merit that both civil and military leaders have provided. Dubik insists that just war proponents have focused exclusively on the tactical dimension of *jus in bello*, thereby omitting the strategic facet of waging war, including the necessary public legitimization, determination of end-state goals, provision of logistical support, and preparation for reconstruction.

The five principles laid out—continuous dialogue, final decision authority, managerial competence, war legitimacy, and resignation—presuppose the classic benchmarks of proportionality and discrimination in *jus in bello*, but these additional five strategic components fill in the gap of what is tragically lacking in the standard just war formulation. When senior civil and military leaders fail to optimize strategic coordination of war via a dynamic partnership involving intense dialogue, the costs of war escalate in both economic and human-casualty terms, rendering those leaders who squandered the war efforts morally culpable. Unforgettably, General Dempsey in his foreword asserts that one of the most important and haunting lines from the entire book consists of these few words: “The difficulty of conditions that may mitigate responsibility does not erase it” (p. viii).

Dubik’s critique is not a replacement of Walzer’s ideas defending just war but rather an addendum that augments the value of strategic planning and

cooperation between civil and military leaders. On reflection, a reader might question whether the strategic aspect of *jus in bello* might not exist already, to some extent, within *jus ad bellum*, considering military advisement as part of the moral calculation of proportionality and probability of success. Additionally, the reader might wonder whether the acceptable range across the military operations continuum would be determined best if the strategic dialogue and robust collaboration between civil and military leadership that Dubik champions went on not only as part of *jus in bello* but at every stage of war and peace. For instance, the war-waging principle of continuous dialogue also might apply to *jus ante bellum* (justice before war: strategic planning to shape fragile states so as to prevent war), *jus ad bellum* (justice in going to war: debating all nonkinetic and military options), and *jus post bellum* (justice after war: planning for reconstruction) to achieve *jus pax* (just peace).

Overall, Dubik’s strategic supplement to the category of *jus in bello* is a legacy that posterity will credit respectfully to the experience and wisdom of a distinguished scholar and warrior.

EDWARD ERWIN



Never Call Me a Hero: A Legendary American Dive-Bomber Pilot Remembers the Battle of Midway, by N. Jack Kleiss, with Timothy Orr and Laura Orr. New York: William Morrow, 2017. 336 pages. \$26.99.

June 4, 1942, stands out as one of the most pivotal moments in American naval history. The events of that day continue to be analyzed, scrutinized, and

debated down to the smallest details. However, few authors can speak with the authority of Captain Jack Kleiss, USN (Ret.). In his memoir of his naval service, Kleiss gives special attention to the part he and the rest of Scouting Squadron 6 played in the battle of Midway. The resulting narrative is compelling and offers a new perspective on the battle. Most histories of the battle try to explain the extended air battle as a complete picture, but Kleiss eschews this approach. It is his own story that the reader follows through the battle, with his personal triumphs and tragedies sharing the stage with the overall description of the desperate victory.

Kleiss was a 1938 Naval Academy graduate from Kansas who joined Scouting 6 in 1941 after his mandatory two years in the surface fleet and flight school. His telling of his story is authoritative throughout, owing to an array of primary resources, including his wartime diary, letters, logbooks, and unit after-action reports. Although he penned his memoir some seventy years after Midway, the account is exceedingly detailed and surprisingly candid. Kleiss was a lieutenant (junior grade) at Midway and served as Scouting 6's second flight commander, directly behind squadron commander Lieutenant Earl Gallaher. From that position, Kleiss put bombs on target on *Kaga* during the momentous afternoon air strike of June 4. Later that afternoon, he put his bombs into *Hiryu* to finish off the Japanese carrier force, and he also would get a hit on *Mikuma* on June 6. For his actions throughout the battle, the Navy awarded Kleiss the Navy Cross.

By telling the story from his perspective in the cockpit, Kleiss avoids many of the discussions of strategy and operations

that dominate the historiography of the battle. However, he specifically cites and particularly disagrees with Walter Lord's *Incredible Victory* (Harper and Row, 1967) as a flawed work that has mis-steered the narrative of the battle and perpetuates the misperception that the remarkable victory was largely the product of luck. "I prefer to believe we won the battle because we knew our stuff just a little bit better than our foes knew theirs. If luck played any role at all, it came in the fact that a few of us pilots lived to fly another day, while many others died. Luck determined who survived, not which side won the battle" (p. 280). Additionally, Kleiss opposes the notion that the victory can be credited mostly to the admirals in charge of the action, Frank Jack Fletcher and Raymond A. Spruance. Kleiss considers the plans for the battle to have been "overly elaborate" (p. 280) and deems the pilots responsible for the victory. Kleiss credits the tactical proficiency of the aviators and the mental flexibility of the squadron leaders and air group commanders with taking advantage of the situation and delivering a sudden, lethal strike—in spite of the admirals' plan.

If June 4, 1942, stands out to the public, it haunts Kleiss and colors the entire tone of his retelling of the battle.

"As the twenty-first century dawned, the Battle of Midway wouldn't leave me alone. To answer the flurry of questions accurately, I had to relive the battle over and over again. I had to come face-to-face with memories I'd long since buried. I had to recall the smell of the salt air, the roar of the wind as it rushed past my cockpit, the sight of red flames coming up from the exploding ships, and other such vivid sensations for which words will never do justice.

I had to summon the faces of friends I'd lost and the sadness that tortured me as I whiled away the aftermath of the battle in my bunk. Today, that day—Thursday, June 4, 1942—hovers over my shoulder like an annoying friend, constantly chirping in my ear, 'I am the most important day of your life.' It will not leave me alone" (p. xiv).

Kleiss's writing (in which he was assisted by Timothy and Laura Orr of Old Dominion University and the Hampton Roads Naval Museum) is easy to read even though it is laced with a slew of technical details, along with his vivid recollections. Anyone wishing to get a better insight into the way in which a scouting squadron operated in the early part of the war should consult this memoir as the first step. However, the emotion carried in the pages gives the work the weight that a secondary source must struggle to provide. It is one

thing to understand academically the meaning of the sacrifice of the torpedo bombing squadrons, but it is another to read Kleiss's account of parting with his best friend on the flight deck of *Enterprise*, with Kleiss in tears, knowing he will never see his friend again.

Never Call Me a Hero challenges the narrative of Midway that is dominated by the admirals and operational details. Kleiss freely admits that his conclusion is biased toward the evidence of his own experiences. However, the book constitutes a remarkably detailed and comprehensive account from one of the key actors in the events of Midway. It stands out as an exceptionally well-rounded military memoir that is worthwhile for both the general reader and the serious student of the battle.

ANDREW J. ROSCOE

OUR REVIEWERS

Jeffrey Biller, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF, is a military professor in the Naval War College's Stockton Center for International Law. The center is the world's premier research institute for the study of international law and military operations throughout the domains of land, sea, aerospace, and cyberspace. Stockton Center faculty teach the core curriculum and electives at the Naval War College, as well as advanced international law courses around the world.

Edward Erwin, Lieutenant Commander, USN, is a Navy chaplain who holds a PhD in theology and ethics from Duke University. Dr. Erwin has taught world religions at Troy University and ethics at the University of Maryland University College. He has written a number of articles for leading academic journals and professional magazines.

James P. McGrath III, Captain, USN, a nuclear-trained surface warfare officer, is currently a military professor of joint military operations at the Naval War College. He received a bachelor of arts in history from Virginia Tech and a master of arts in military history from Norwich University, and is a distinguished graduate of the Naval War College. He commanded Maritime Expeditionary Squadron 7 and has served on the Seventh Fleet, European Command, and the Joint Staff.