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Robert F. Dorr, *Air Combat: An Oral History of Fighter Pilots*. New York: Berkley, 2006. Pp. viii, 343. ISBN 978-0-425-21741-2.

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You can almost hear Chuck Yeager drawling through a piece of Beechnut gum in *Air Combat: An Oral History of Fighter Pilots*: whether for a fighter ace's favorite yarn, great photographs, or technical specifications on war birds old and new, Robert F. Dorr's newest book is well worth reading, a veritable Who's Who of American military aviators seen through a respected aviation historian's eyes. Dorr, who describes himself as a Korean War Air Force veteran and retired diplomat, has written more than seventy books about air power and airplanes from his home base in Virginia.

Dorr starts his latest offering by exploding a few more myths over Pearl Harbor, where infamy and technology met in the skies over the gray behemoths they would soon replace as the gods of war. Historians have already thoroughly analyzed America's pitiful unreadiness on 7 December 1941. Dorr merely adds a few more details.

As expected, he introduces 2nd Lts. George Welch and Kenneth Taylor, two fresh-faced kids who took their Curtiss P-40 B Tomahawks into the air from an obscure airfield to knock down four Nakajima B5N2 "Kate" dive bombers. They were the first Japanese aircraft that America's fledgling Army Air Corps birdmen had met in combat. Before the day was over, Welch would add two more victories to his tally, including a famed Mitsubishi A6M2 "Zero" fighter, one of at least three supposedly invincible Zeroes downed by American aerial defenders that day. Dorr notes that Welch went on to become a sixteen-victory ace who lost his life in 1954 testing an F-100 Super Sabre, something rarely mentioned in the post-war mythology that grew from his exploits at Pearl Harbor.

Dorr's narration of the Pearl Harbor attack is replete with stories of the courage and determination of many others who withstood the aerial assault, including nurses, frustrated bomber pilots, and ten other Army fighter pilots who fought with varying degrees of success. Among the latter, 2nd Lt. Phillip Rasmussen (still wearing pajamas) took off in an antiquated, radial-engine Curtiss P-36 Mohawk fighter that was slower than the enemy dive-bombers and torpedo planes he was pursuing. He still managed to down an enemy aircraft and land in one piece without a tail wheel after his fighter was turned into a flying sieve. Dorr's fast-paced account of his combat over Pearl Harbor sets the style and tone for the rest of the book.

Among Dorr's extensive collection of pilots' recollections are the personal accounts of airmen who flew the little known and usually maligned Bell P-39 Airacobra. Although under-armed, ineffective at high altitude, and very quirky to fly, the P-39 was a front-line fighter in the opening days of U.S. involvement in the Second World War. Air Corps strategists sent almost half of the 9,589 P-39s produced to our Russian allies, who made good use of them. Even so, the discussion of the P-39, one of the Army's primary contributions to the Cactus Air Force at Guadalcanal, is a welcome addition to the history of an obscure and frequently slandered American aircraft.

Dorr does not simply recite facts about the book's dozens of historical airplane pictures that illustrate the remarkable stories of wartime pilots trying to explain their place in history. He rapidly surveys the evolution in the design of airplanes as witnessed by the pilots who flew them, men who are the only constant in his examination of air combat. They seem always to be the same understated, insanely brave aviators who dared when others dared not. Double ace Maj. Gen. Frederick C. "Boots" Blesse said it best: "No guts, no glory."

Anyone familiar with Dorr's many previous books¹ knows how relentless a researcher he is. In 332 pages, he creates a fine synopsis of how much aerial combat has changed while remaining ever the same. He tackles that complicated paradox with an expert's finesse.

There are not enough pages in this book to mention every notable aircraft and pilot that flew between Pearl Harbor and the sorties by McDonnell Douglas (later Boeing) F-15E "Strike Eagles" against Saddam Hussein's soldiers in the Iraqi desert. Notably absent, for example, are the pilots who flew the Chance-Vought F4U Corsair, the "bent-winged bird," that the U.S. Marine Corps used with such deadly effect in both World War II and Korea. Also missing are the magnificent pilots who flew the Navy's stubby little Grumman F4 Wildcat in battles from Guadalcanal to Midway in the Pacific and against French and Germans in North Africa. But these are small missteps in an otherwise superlative study.

Dorr even introduces a note of social conscience into aerial combat. Without maudlin sentimentality, he tells the story of one of America's first black jet aviators, a true pioneer who volunteered to fight for his country when it wasn't particularly interested in fighting for him—Lt. Gen. Earl Brown, a remarkable aviator who overcame the discriminatory social mores of his time to rise to the top of U.S. Air Force command.

Brown had been one of the first African-Americans to complete flight training after the Air Force was integrated in 1948. After learning to fly in the T-6 Texan and polishing his skills in the elegant North American P-51 Mustang, he flew the beautiful North American F-86 Sabre jet fighter that achieved a 10-1 kill ratio over Soviet-manned MIG-15 fighters in Korea. In his illustrious career, Brown went on to fly McDonnell Douglas F-4C Phantoms over North Vietnam, getting shot down, and rising to three-star rank in the process. Today he volunteers his services at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

In Chapter 19, "Black Jets over Baghdad," Dorr introduces the reader to the mysteries of the super-secret Lockheed F-117 Nighthawk, the U.S. Air Force's first "stealth" fighter. This bat-winged craft gave "shock and awe" a new meaning in the skies of Iraq during the opening days of Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom. Dorr's treatment ensures that it will always be the stuff of legends.

Dorr also tells the story of Capt. Dale Zelko, who went "downtown" over Baghdad in a Black Jet in the opening gambit of Desert Storm. Despite Zelko's self-assurance, he followed the adage "dress for egress," a jocular reference to the very real possibility of being shot down. Notwithstanding the vaunted invisibility of the world's most technologically advanced fighter aircraft, its pilots were not so sure. When the war over Baghdad began on 21 January 1991, the ancient city was the most heavily defended target American airmen had attacked since the dark days over Hanoi during the Vietnam War. In Zelko's words to Dorr,

¹ See, e.g., *Air War Hanoi* (NY: Sterling, 1988), *Chopper: A History of America Military Helicopter Operations from WWII to the War on Terror* (NY: Berkley, 2005), and *Marine Air: The History of the Flying Leathernecks in Words and Photos* (NY: Berkley, 2005).

Their anti-aircraft artillery was wicked. It was unbelievable. Most people probably assume we were flying high above the anti-aircraft fire. That's not true at all. We flew most of our combat target runs right smack in the heart of some of the worst triple-A, 23-mm and 37-mm mostly Gee whiz, what if I am on the ground, even for days, and during those days, and during those cold desert nights, exposure... (310, 304).

What panache! Gee whiz, some things just never change. Like the man said, "there just ain't no bucks without Buck Rogers." Still ain't. Dorr understands. When you read this book, you will too.