



Fire on the Hangar Deck: Ordeal of the Oriskany

Wynn F. Foster

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Ever since man first ventured to sea, fire has been his worst enemy. No less so on the modern aircraft carrier where high explosives, volatile fuels, and flaming engines are often mixed with sailors working long hours under arduous conditions. In 1966, this hazardous situation led to a catastrophe costing the lives of 44 men, injuring hundreds more, and doing millions of dollars of damage. USS Oriskany, a twenty-one-year-old Essex-class carrier, was conducting combat flight operations in the Gulf of Tonkin when a night illumination flare ignited on her hangar deck and instantly transformed her into a flaming holocaust. Wynn Foster, an attack pilot who flew missions from Oriskany until just before the tragedy, has recreated the tragic story of this terrible fire. He draws on firsthand knowledge of the ship, extensive research, and in-depth interviews with survivors. The result is a gripping account that vividly describes efforts to combat a situation that was out of control from the beginning. It is a story of disappointing errors, impressive professionalism, dark tragedy, breathtaking heroism, and lessons to be learned. In the ongoing tradition of the Naval Institute's open forum, Foster explores the preventable causes of the fire and assesses the Navy's handling of the aftermath. He reinforces current concerns about high-tempo operations conducted with dwindling resources and warns of the consequences of the mismatch that occurs when warfare is coupled with a peacetime economy. His book offers an eye-opening view of the challenges faced by military units whose daily routine is filled with lurking danger and an exciting, inspiring tale of man meeting disaster head-on.

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