

EYES OF THE FLEET OVER VIETNAM

RF-8 Crusader Combat Photo-Reconnaissance Missions

by Kenneth V. Jack, Casemate, 2021, \$39.95.

The Navy and Marine Corps F-8 Crusader community was known for stratospheric morale despite the speedy Vought's reputation as a pilot killer. But "Last of the Gunfighters" remains the Crusader's lingering image, even though the type retired from U.S. service in 1987.

However, the "MiG Master" role was only part of the story. Kenneth V. Jack, a former member of the light photographic (VFP) community, has an intimate knowledge of the Crusader's reconnaissance role. His previous book, *Blue Moon Over Cuba*,

addressed his squadron's RF-8 operations over Cuba in collaboration with the VFP-62 skipper, Capt. W.B. Ecker. In this one, Jack begins with the background of carrier-based photo-reconnaissance, including a dip of the wing to the Marine squadron, VMCJ-1. However, VFP-63 sent RF-8 detachments to Tonkin Gulf carriers literally from before the beginning of the Vietnam War. The first combat loss was a USS *Kitty Hawk* jet in June 1964, two months before the Tonkin Gulf incident, but the pilot escaped captivity.



Thereafter photo-reconnaissance pilots and maintainers were a constant presence off Vietnam, including a few detachments of VFP-62 and VMCJ-1. Dating from World War II, photo-recon pilots prided themselves as "unarmed and

unafraid" (although one pilot said, "Speak for yourself!") and "first in, last out." The North Vietnamese knew that pre- and post-strike photos were routine, and prepared accordingly. About 30 RF-8s were lost to all causes with 12 pilots killed and six captured. Jack provides details and insight on each.

The only thing lacking is an index, which the publisher declined to provide. Otherwise, the book has nearly 170 good-quality photos, many in color. Well documented with notes, *Eyes of the Fleet* provides not only a close-up look at the RF-8 over Southeast Asia but useful appendices covering the broader aspects of the Vietnam air campaign.

Barrett Tillman